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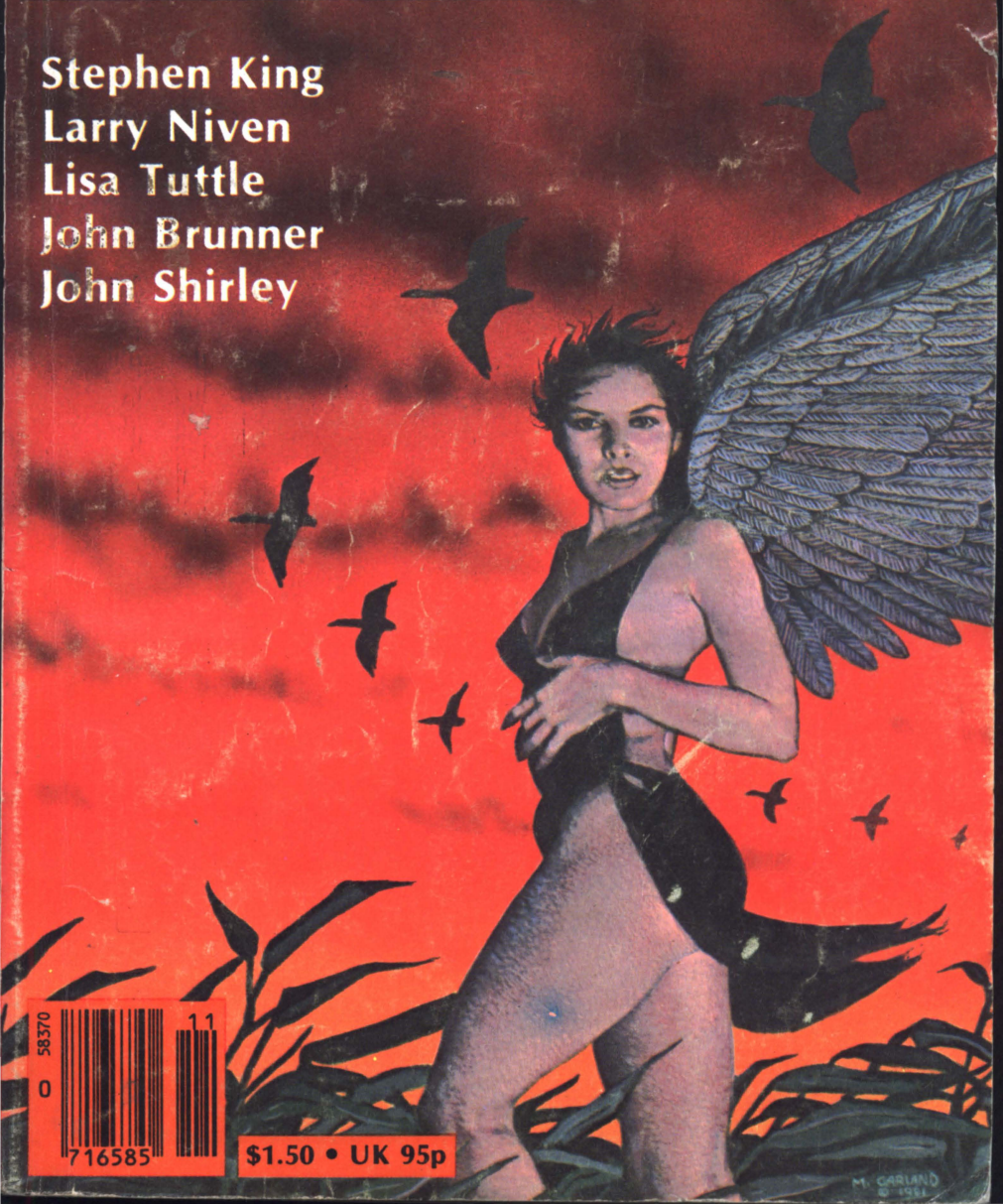

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 61, No. 5, Whole No. 366; November 1981. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.50 per copy. Annual subscription $15.00; $17.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 15%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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Here is the incredible story behind the discovery of a body frozen into a glacier in the Swiss Alps. It turns out to be the corpse of a Waffen SS General — the question is: how did it get there?

The Man Who Saw the Thousand-Year Reich

BY
JOHN BRUNNER

If Mr. Secrett says to me one more time that there are some people destined for the *culs-de-sac* of history, that he's one, and he thinks I'm another, I shall scream.

Because I'm dreadfully afraid he must be right.

How else to account for the fact that no matter how weird or extraordinary my current problem may be, Mr. Secrett invariably turns up in connection with it? Worse still, he always produces—

I was about to say an explanation. Maybe hallucination would be more correct.

Yet to look at him one would never guess what wild yarns he's given to spinning. Especially when abroad, he's the perfect caricature of the old-style Englishman, given to Aertex shirts and Austin Reed chokers, and politely patronizing toward foreigners.

Except, of course, for the Swiss, whom the English have always looked on as psychological cousins: citizens of a land-locked island, as it were, blending German, French, Italian and

Romansh language-groups as though they were the counterparts of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish.

So really I suppose I should not have been surprised when the phone rang in my hotel room in Riehen, near Basel, which is in one of those odd little peninsulas where Switzerland juts into Germany for some long-forgotten historical reason, and through a hangover fog due to too much of a superb *Poire William* liqueur I heard his all-too-familiar voice saying, "Scrivener! What in the world possessed you to utter such a farrago of nonsense about General Wentschler?"

I reviewed a whole range of curses, decided that while they might be efficacious against anybody else I knew they would have absolutely no impact on Mr. Secrett, and in the end contented myself with saying bitterly, "I suppose you know the real story."

"Of course I do!" he boomed with the sort of cheerfulness which is particularly loathsome before breakfast ... although, as I discovered when I checked my watch, it was now nine fifteen and he had doubtless been up and about since seven. Or even six.

"Then why," I said, "didn't you go on the telly last night instead of me?"

"Oh, they wouldn't have asked me, would they? The internationally celebrated Mr. Scrivener, on the other hand...."

"Stop it!" I told him crossly. "Where are you?"

"In the hotel lobby. I don't imagine you've had breakfast yet?"

"No, not yet," I agreed with heavy irony.

"I have, of course, but I could manage another cup of hot chocolate — they do it so well here, don't they? See you at the reception desk in ten minutes."

For a while after I put down the phone, I contemplated going back to sleep; the curtains were still drawn and the room was temptingly dark.

Then curiosity got the better of me, and I grumpily swung my legs to the floor. Besides, the old bastard was right: I was ashamed of the performance I'd put up last night, and the only excuse I could offer was that the fee they were paying was generous enough to make me — shall we say? — anxious to please....

But if only Mr. Secrett hadn't shown up, I could have salved my conscience by ascribing it all to necessary experience and gone happily home in a week, or at any rate a few days, later than scheduled. I was on what I justified to myself by calling it a "working holiday," following up what had looked like a promising lead for a series of articles. Two days after getting here, I'd discovered that someone from *Der Spiegel* had beaten me to it, and his stuff was being syndicated.

Trying not to look too disappointed, and not wanting to head for home until I ran completely out of funds, I'd been swanning around the area hoping

that sheer luck might lead me to some other project, when exactly that happened. A TV producer in Basel got hold of a very odd story indeed and went looking for people who might comment authoritatively on it and learned that a foreign writer was in Riehen and, what was more, spoke enough German to answer a few questions on screen.

Fabelhaft! From my point of view as well as his, especially after I'd mentally converted his offer into sterling.

So they sent a limousine, wined and dined me, told me the story (three times, to make sure my creaky command of German didn't lead to an embarrassing misunderstanding) and sat back and waited for me to produce an explanation *à la* von Däniken or Laszlo Perkins.

Which — I confess it with blushes — was all I *had* been able to come up with. But I can at least plead in mitigation that I only heard the story two hours before I went on camera.

What they told me was this:

A month before, when the spring thaw set in across the Alps, a patrol setting off explosives to forestall avalanches in the vicinity of a winter-sports center had found a man's body frozen into a badly crevassed glacier. Assuming it must be some unfortunate climber, they chopped it free ... only to find it clad in full evening dress, patent leather pumps, and an overcoat which, even though it had a fur collar, was not exactly designed for mountaineering.

They were able to work out the rate of movement of the glacier and concluded the man must have been caught in a snowfall some thirty to fifty years previously. Searching the corpse for clues, the surgeon at the local mortuary found some tattoo marks under the left arm.

They were a blood-group — group O — and a series of figures which one of his assistants recognized. It was a Waffen-SS number.

Checking with the famous Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, they discovered that it belonged to General Horst Wentschler, who had been in overall charge of the "final solution to the Jewish problem" from September, 1943, to April, 1944, in the *Gau*, or administration region, of Bohemia. And Bohemia, which is now once again in what had already briefly been Czechoslovakia, was a long way from Switzerland — particularly in wartime.

It was officially on record, for documents concerning the event had survived World War II, that General Wentschler had last been seen by his batman on 3rd April 1944 in high spirits. He had hinted that some kind of honor was to be bestowed on him; the batman gathered he had been summoned to receive yet another decoration from the Führer. A car collected him from the castle which was serving as headquarters. Its driver presented what appeared to be authentic papers, but must obviously have been forged, for he was never seen again alive.

Everybody jumped to the conclusion he had been kidnapped by a clever resistance group. Hostages were taken, and after a week they were publicly executed in the main square of the nearest town.

Now here he had turned up again, frozen to death, but apparently uninjured, with even a flower in his lapel. Yet without his identity documents — without his cherished Iron Cross — and across the frontier in a neutral country.

Opposite me on the TV show was a local journalist who got in first with all the suggestions I'd have liked to make: Wentschler had decided that the Germans were bound to lose the war, so he had bargained with some unknown intermediary to smuggle him to a noncombatant nation, but no one showed up at the rendezvous to take him further; in despair he set out on foot through the snow to look for help, got lost, died of exposure.... Moderately neat; I wanted to find out why he was in evening dress and such unsuitable shoes and was even busy inventing some plausible reasons.

But then I decided I was perhaps the lucky one after all, for the presenter of the show came back with some devastating counterblows. Wentschler was a fanatical Nazi, who had been repeatedly commended for sparing no pains in the performance of his "duty"; he was one of the youngest men to be promoted general in all the SS corps; he left behind a personal fortune which, because he was single and childless, he willed to the furtherance of Nazi domination; and he had not been reported by any guard or sentry of policeman on his way from Bohemia to the Swiss frontier, at a time when the tide of war had begun to turn and the strictest possible controls were being kept on everybody's movements, even generals'.

That drove me back to the kidnapping idea. When the cameras turned on me, I feebly suggested that he must indeed have been tricked by a resistance group, but not a local one — perhaps people with first-rate support from Allied special services. The presenter gave me a warning frown. That was not what he expected from me, with my wild writer's imagination. Besides, as he said aloud, surely such a group would have taken him alive to an Allied base for interrogation, not released him when over the Swiss border.

So maybe he managed to escape, I offered ... but that sounded weak even to my ears, and by this stage I had cottoned on. In the nick of time I remembered H. Beam Piper's classic story *He Walked Around the Horses* and spent the next five minutes elaborating a time-space warp — not a very easy task in German, at least not to someone whose vocabulary is as limited as mine. But that was just what everyone was looking for. There were beaming faces all round the studio when the show came to its end, and the producer insisted on taking me to the hospitality

room and plying me with that excellent liqueur. Around midnight they poured me into a car and took me back to Riehen.

I had guilty dreams.

I thought that might have been the way of it," said Mr. Secrett, pouring me a third cup of coffee. "But I'm ashamed of you nonetheless. Space-time warps, forsooth! A moment's reflection should have shown you the only logical conclusion without needing me to spell it out."

"Spare me the sarcasm," I muttered. "I'm in such a state, I can't work out whether you're really here, or whether I'm still having nightmares."

He looked hurt. "Surely you know I take a walking tour in mountain country every spring...? Ah, of course. I don't believe I've seen you since I decided to come to Switzerland this year instead of the Pyrenees or the Harz. You should keep in closer touch, old boy!" He prodded me playfully with his nearer elbow. I winced.

"Anyhow," he resumed, "I reached the hostelry where I'd reserved a room, and it was too early to turn in. So I watched television for a while to see how the other half lives, ha-ha! And there you were, large as life but not so natural, talking about Wentschler, of all people. So I thought I might do a favor to a fellow-countryman and get to you before the journalists. You've read the newspapers—? No, of course not. But I did see a rather sensational rag on the bus, and apparently the show you were on has a reputation for pandering to the viewers' baser impulses, in an attempt to hold the audience against competition from across the border."

"That figures," I sighed. "But do you honestly know what really happened to this bloody general?"

"For once," said Mr. Secrett, leaning back and staring into nowhere, "I will concur with your choice of adjective. Ordinarily I regard words like 'bloody' as an infuriating waste of breath. But in the case of Horst Albrecht Wentschler the term is peculiarly apt. Which is why I can't be sorry that he became the victim of the most ingenious practical joke in history. Picture, if you will...."

It was late evening. Weary, for he had spent today investigating, proving, and executing the guilty parties to a charge that Jews were successfully bribing concentration-camp guards to supply food in exchange for gold tooth-fillings, General Wentschler strode into his bedroom, where a bright fire burned.

And stopped dead, reaching for his pistol. Instead of his batman awaiting him, there was a stranger, sitting in his own favorite chair.

But the man was making no attempt to conceal himself. He was rising and giving a crisp "Heil Hitler!" Moreover he was clad in a uniform almost

identical to Wentschler's own: black, with silver insignia. *Almost* identical. Where, if ever, had been seen before that device of a skull and crossed rockets?

"Herr General! Permit me to present myself! I am Leon Wolfhaber, and I have the honor to be Oberkommandant of the Wissenschaft-SS. And" — like magic he had produced his own pistol while Wentschler was still letting his hand hover above the holster, and it looked like no pistol the general had seen before — "I must instruct you that if you so much as mention to any living soul without express permission from myself, Herr Himmler, or the Führer, that you know of my organization's existence, I shall be obliged to ensure your silence. Be seated. You will find what I have to say most interesting."

There was something in the eyes of this stranger which prevented Wentschler from shouting for his aides. Slowly he thought through what he had just heard, and a thrill pervaded him.

Wissenschaft-SS?

He had never before heard of a "scientific" branch of the Schutzstaffel. But it was entirely credible! One knew about the superweapons which would snatch victory for Germany from the very jaws of defeat — the rockets which would rain destruction not only on Britain but even on America, once they were deployed. Whenever the clouds of battle loomed darkest, something always appeared to lighten the prospect of tomorrow, even if it were only a faster poison gas to eliminate more Jews in a shorter time.

"How did you get in here?" he barked, retaining all he could of his customary air of command.

"Oh!" — with a shrug. "We of the Wissenschaft-SS come and go as we choose, subject only to the decisions of the Führer. And it is upon a mission from him personally that I visit you."

Holstering his pistol again, he waved at the room's other chair.

"Be seated, Herr General. I have instructed my orderly to bring wine."

"Your orderly—? What about mine?"

"Your staff are admirably trained. They have been taught to recognize superior authority by instinct, which is the hallmark of the true Aryan. Had it not been so" — with an access of fierceness — "I assure you I would have abandoned my mission and returned to Berlin!"

"What," said Wentschler, and with the question surrendered all intention of challenging this intruder's rights, "do you want of me?"

"To bestow on you a reward which, for the time being, the Führer in his wisdom has decreed must be confined to a handful of those most loyal to the ideal of the Thousand Year Reich — a reward far surpassing any medal or decoration or promotion. A reward which has already been granted to two people you know, but which

they, in duty bound, have never mentioned to anybody, nor will they until the time is ripe. Nonetheless, it has happened, and it will also happen to you."

Conscious that his listener was hanging on every word, Wolfhaber removed his severe peaked cap, revealing a head of flawlessly blond hair cut not quite short enough to let the skin gleam through.

"There has been much talk of traveling through space, Herr General. It will indeed be through space that we launch our continental rockets to shatter the cities of Jew-dominated America. But a defense against that form of attack is at least conceivable.

"Have you, on the other hand, ever considered an attack through time?"

For a long moment Wentschler stood transfixed. To go back and eliminate an enemy commander before a crucial battle! To remove Churchill, Stalin or Roosevelt, leaving only second-rate substitutes to fill their shoes! What a vista of marvels opened up with those few words!

"Have we already—?" he husked. But Wolfhaber shook his head, sinking back into his chair; a moment, and Wentschler imitated him.

"Unfortunately we have many problems to resolve. I take it you instantly thought of altering the past?"

Dry-mouthed, Wentschler nodded.

"We are still working on that aspect of it. So far, what we have achieved is to move, not objects — oh, apart from garments and other insignificant items — but people into the future. It appears time-travel is easiest when dealing with the fluidity of the days to come. Well, that's not very surprising; it's easier to build a shell than to re-assemble it after it's gone off. But wait a moment." Wolfhaber drew back his sleeve and consulted a watch with improbably many dials. "The orderly will enter any moment and he is not cleared to hear such talk."

A few heartbeats ticked away, and there came a tap at the door. Wolfhaber's curt *"Herein!"* produced a thick-set man with a moon face and vacant grin, who bore on a silver tray a bottle of French champagne, two cut-crystal glasses, and a bowl of little crackers with dark-green inclusions.

"Japanese," Wolfhaber said casually as he dismissed the orderly and opened the wine himself, spilling not a drop. "One of our *pro-tem.* allies' few contributions to civilization.... By the way," he added as the door closed, "that man is one of our pilot genetic products. Typical of what the Slavs will turn into when we need them to farm the rich lands of the Ukraine: a perfect serf who will never argue with his master. You realize, we *Wissenschaftskünstler* regard your way of going about the eugenic problem as somewhat wasteful — though," he hastily corrected himself, "so long as the Führer deems it necessary, we can only ad-

mire your thoroughness. Already you're showing a profit in terms of fabric, tooth-stoppings, and recyclable fats, though the cost at two marks per head for cremation of the remains.... Excuse me! Do sample this wine. Even though the Führer is, as you're aware, a vegetarian and a teetotaler, he accords it a place in the cellar at Berchtesgaden."

Raising his glass with a mechanical *"Prosit!"*, Wentschler sipped — and sipped again, and swigged the lot.

"And now," Wolfhaber said, giving him a refill, "to the meat of my errand.

"I have told you that certain persons have visited the future and that all of them were dedicated to the ideal of the Thousand Year Reich. You can easily guess the purpose of this undertaking."

"They are to report back on which of certain key decisions paid off?"

Wolfhaber beamed. "Congratulations, Herr General! Not even — but I must guard my tongue! Let me just say that you have broken all records among your predecessors for quickness on the uptake. You will readily see why total loyalty to the principles of National Socialism is the prime condition for the selection of our pioneers; how otherwise could we be certain of an honest report?"

"But surely," Wentschler ventured, "if you are already working on the problem of sending information back through time, they will have solved it by — by some future date?"

A cloud seemed to cross Wolfhaber's brow. He said, "It grieves me to admit it, but it might well be that the problem is intractable. Conflicts with a law of nature. Barring this one case which we had the good fortune to chance on almost as soon as our research paid off. That is, that information in a human brain is exempt. We can't send a message to the future and ask for a reply. We can send a living man and interrogate him on his return. It is not easy! We are prevented, for some strange reason, from choosing — oh — someone gifted with exceptional powers of memory and simply sending him ahead to a library and telling him to memorize a history book. All our successes, and I may admit to you that the process does not always succeed, have been with people who in themselves constituted some kind of turning point of history. You can guess at the identity of some of them by thinking of the military commanders who since the inception of the project — that's to say, from about this time last year — have brilliantly turned defeat into victory. There have been a number of disappointments, too.... But I'm sure you won't be among them."

"You think I'm one of those — those crucial people?"

"If you were not so regarded, I would not be here," Wolfhaber declared with finality and, having drained his glass, threw it into the fireplace. "Read this, which I was given personally by Hitler yesterday, and decide

whether you will accept the challenge!"

He drew from his pocket an envelope bearing Chancellery seals of heavy red wax. Opening it, Wentschler discovered that miracle of miracles, a letter in the Führer's own hand. Words danced before his eyes.

Very honored General! This comes to you by the hand of well-trusted Oberkommandant Wolfhaber who will explain to you why for once the Leader must be a follower. It makes me sadder than I can say that reason persuades me to postpone that moment when I can myself witness the consequences of my actions. Bring me those data I need to conclude the war swiftly, and I shall be forever in your debt.

Appended were the familiar signature and the seal showing an eagle surmounting a ring with a swastika inside.

"Well?" Wolfhaber said, permitting himself a smile. "Do you accept, or must we dismiss you as unworthy and arrange your elimination before you have a chance to reveal the existence of this project to a third party?"

Handing back the letter, Wentschler sprang to attention. "Let it never be said," he whispered, "that I failed my master in his hour of need!"

"I was certain you would react this way," Wolfhaber said, also rising as he took back the letter. "Be so good as to obey the rest of my instructions, then! Change at once into civilian dress — evening clothes would be most suitable. Divest yourself of anything to connect you with present time, all identity papers, all orders, medals, and so forth."

Wentschler felt a pang of dismay.

"Even my Iron Cross?"

"Everything," said Wolfhaber firmly. "Reflect a moment! Whom do we wish to arrive first in the future wearing the full panoply of Nazism...?"

"Oh!"

"Precisely! Were we to tackle the matter otherwise, we might risk some sort of cult of personality, even of resurrection! A religion might well result!"

"That has not been stamped out?"

"Not so far as our techniques at this stage permit us to reach. You are acquainted with the term 'feedback'?"

"Ah ... yes, I believe so."

"At all costs we must avoid destabilizing the continuum. We must employ our methods to create the Nazi future before we can risk exploring the alternatives. Not that it matters, naturally. All alternatives are by definition inferior. Do as I say, please."

Wentschler was momentarily at a loss. He said after a pause, "You want me to change into plain evening dress?"

"I already said so!" Wolfhaber replied, glancing again at his strange watch. "Hurry! There is a deadline to meet!"

"But I'm afraid...." The confession cost Wentschler dear. "I'm afraid I don't know where my evening clothes are."

"But you possess some?"

"Of course! In the charge of my

batman!"

Wolfhaber pondered a moment. At last he said with a sigh, "Very well, then. Call him, get changed, see me at the main door in ten minutes. And don't fail!"

"I swear by my honor as an officer, by the motto on my dagger, I shall not!"

Mollified, Wolfhaber turned to go.

"One thing!" Wentschler threw after him.

"Yes?"

"How far am I to be sent?"

"Ah! Like all our volunteers, you would like to go into the far future, yes? So would we — so would I! I can only say, with regret, it must be a matter of a very short journey: five, ten, at best fifteen years. We rely on you, on your return, to tell us exactly when you arrived. And, of course, to pay attention to absolutely everything, especially news reports, which you have witnessed. And one more thing, which I blame myself for having overlooked.

"Before actually putting you through the transmitter — which for obvious reasons you will not be allowed to see or even deduce the location of — we shall perform a minor surgical operation. An explosive charge will be implanted in your neck, adjacent to the spinal column. At the first hint you plan to betray your identity, it will explode. The incision will be imperceptible, apart from a slight soreness. I trust this does not incline you to change your mind?"

"But if I can't tell anybody who I am, then how—?"

"It's very simple. We send instructions by what we call 'the slow road' — in other words, we leave messages where our succesors are bound to find them — explaining what we plan to do. Arrangements are made at the receiving end. Owing to the short range we can presently achieve, our techniques are still being researched in secret, but our successors *do* get the message and *do* make the arrangements. In fact, most of our volunteers so far have had rather a good time: a dinner party, for example, or a ball, or the chance to witness a military parade and be entertained afterwards in an officers' mess.... But you press me too far, Herr General!"

The door slammed.

In a fever of excitement, Wentschler ordered his batman to produce the garments called for by Wolfhaber while he washed and shaved. It was beneath him, however, to admit that he was leaving behind his prized decorations; he hid those where he was sure they would not be chanced on before his return. It occurred to him that perhaps that might not be long hence; with control over time, the Wissenschaft-SS might be able to bring him back almost before his absence was noticed ... which obviously accounted for Wolfhaber's failure to mention the need to explain his departure to his superiors.

Humming contentedly, letting his batman draw what conclusions he liked from his master's behavior, Wentschler dressed precisely as instructed and went down to the main gate, where a Horch staff-car awaited him.

Less than two kilometers from the castle, a needle slid up from the cushions of the back seat where Wolfhaber was completing his briefing, and before Wentschler could complain about the prick, he was washed away into unconsciousness.

The last thing he heard was his companion saying gently, "Remember, Herr General, even you may not know where our equipment is located...."

He woke in a normal physical state (bar a dull ache on the side of his neck, which he had after all been warned about), to find himself stretched out fully clad except for his hat, overcoat and gloves on a silk-covered bed in a room where four wall-lamps shed a peach-colored glow. It was night, as he realized the moment his eyes lit on the window, for the curtains were partly open. He had woken prepared to be angry at what Wolfhaber had done, and now reflex brought him to his feet, his mind full of blackout regulations.

But the instant he looked beyond the glass, he realized he was making a mistake. There were street lamps aglow to left and right, and other lighted windows.

This was no city in danger of air raids.

For the first time he began to believe the miracle Wolfhaber had described to him.

If only he could climb out and go exploring! But Wolfhaber had explained why he must not, and anyhow there were stout bars to prevent him.

As though alerted by his leaving the bed, a man appeared in the doorway of the room. He was a magnificent Aryan specimen: blue-eyed, blond-haired, almost two meters tall. He wore a black bowtie with a tailcoat ... but perhaps fashions had changed.

He said, "I'm glad to see you awake, sir. Your host and hostess await you below as soon as you have performed your ablutions. Be so kind as to knock on the door when you are ready, and I shall be pleased to escort you downstairs."

He vanished again, and the door shut with a firm clunk.

Presumably, since he was the first contact the general had had since — well, since "arrival" — that man would be party to the time-travel secret...?

But he must take nothing for granted. Wolfhaber had emphasized that as yet the scientists knew little of the strange and wonderful new world he was visiting. Above all, they had insisted on finding out nothing about their sucessors, for fear of creating the destabilizing feedback effect.

So he must simply do as he was told for the time being, even though he was sorry not to remember how he had been transmitted here. A shining arch-

way, or a silver tunnel, or—

Never mind! He reprimanded himself. And, on noticing a washbasin beside the bed, remembered he was supposed to "perform ablutions." Welcome enough; he felt soiled by his trip. Turning on the taps and reaching for the soap, which was brand-new, he caught sight of something in a wastebasket.

Out of curiosity he picked it up. It proved to be the wrapper from the soap ... and that in itself was remarkable, for he had long been used to soap that came naked, four-square and functional. And on it he read:

JASMINE SOAP. Formula copyright 1950 by Imperial Chemical Industries for all countries of the world.

1950!

He had no time to reflect on the implications of the rest of the text, for here was the tall blond man again, waiting impassive in the doorway, saying, "Excuse me, sir, but the entire company is assembled for dinner except yourself, and it is long past sundown."

Hasitly drying his hands and making use of a spotlessly clean comb which lay beside the basin, Wentschler turned to go.

"Are you the son of the house?" he inquired.

"No, sir!" — in a tone of vague puzzlement. "I'm the underbutler. Kindly follow me."

Out along a broad landing overlooking a handsomely tiled hall, down wide stairs thickly carpeted, towards a double-doored anteroom from which came music and lively chat. On the way Wentschler was casting about for useful information, but all he worked out was the obvious: his host was extremely well-to-do. On the walls there were carefully lighted paintings and, here and there, carvings in illuminated niches. It dismayed the general to notice that the pictures were of a type he regarded as thoroughly decadent — most of them abstracts — and the sculptures were a mixture of primitive African and modern nonrepresentational. However, it was known that even Reichsmarschall Göring had granted a place in his collection to a few such works, so....

The underbutler opened the door and stood aside. Within, another servant announced him by the name Wolfhaber had said all their time-travelers adopted: "Herr Hans Schmidt!"

And Wentschler advanced to meet his host and hostess, just in time repressing his automatic "Heil Hitler!", for the man who turned beaming to him was offering his hand to be shaken.

But the company of guests was an even worse shock than the pictures. Nine people were present: a coal-black African in tribal robes, an Indian woman in a sari, a man who could only be Chinese, one very blond girl with long hair in a gown that scarcely pretended to cover her bosom, a Eurasian woman, a swarthy man who looked like a gypsy, a boy of about sixteen

with close-curling negroid hair and a complexion like milky coffee, and a woman with short red hair wearing something like backless beach-pajamas and a lot of rings, and finally the man proffering his hand, whose bald pate was surrounded by slicked-down black hair and whose nose was distinctly hooked.

Moreover, the music, which emanated from a radio-gramophone adjacent to a large televisor — the latter's screen at present dark — was nigger music of the kind called "swing"....

Pretending he was perfectly at ease, but shocked to his very soul, "Schmidt" briefly touched hands and could not help clicking his heels, which provoked some raised eyebrows.

"Welcome, welcome!" the host said hastily. "I'm Jakob Feuerstein! Let me present you to my wife. My dear, you'll remember my mentioning that Herr Schmidt has been abroad for a long while — yes?"

And this was getting worse by the moment. For his wife was the Eurasian woman, small and delicate, smiling up at him and elevating her hand in a way that made it clear she expected it to be kissed.

"And my son Paul, from my first marriage of course—"

The boy, whose grin was broad and handshake firm.

"And Herr and Frau Sikelole from South Africa—"

The tall black man and, incredibly, the splendidly Aryan blonde.

"And Fräulein O'Keefe—" The redhead.

"And Fräulein Dass—"

The one in a sari, slim and elegant and very conscious of being the most beautiful woman in the room ... but Wentschler was immune from such reactions.

"And Herr Ling and Herr Nagy! Now you know everybody, let me offer you a drink. Franz!" —with a snap of his fingers towards the butler. "Whisky, gin, port, sherry, or would you prefer champagne?"

"A glass of mineral water, if you please," Wentschler said through lips that had become as stiff as cardboard. This was terrible! What could have gone wrong? How could this be the future of the Reich? What were these mongrels, these simians, doing in this magnificent house and speaking fluent German, albeit with strange accents? Why were the servants so obviously members of the Herrenvolk? And why was the blonde girl smiling and clinging to the arm of her black husband like that? The sight nauseated him!

Had it not been for the ache in his neck, which reminded him of the doom that awaited any admission of his identity, he would have marched out and gone to explore that city. Of course, if he were to do that, when the unpredictable time came for his return — he had learned that much from Wolfhaber as they were leaving the castle — he might not be in range of the mysterious energy-field which governed his

presence and his return to 1944....

No, he dared not. He must keep up the act, if only to report that on this trip something had gone most dreadfully wrong.

"Cigarette?" suggested the boy Paul, offering a cardboard pack of the sliding-drawer type.

"Thank you, but I don't," the general answered stiffly, and the boy returned the pack to his pocket, but not before Wentschler, eyes keen for any hint or clue about this terrifying future, had seen that it bore the trademark of a bearded sailor within a life preserver and the legend *Players Export*. In English....

Which set his mind on another tack. Where was the picture of Hitler one would expect to see in such a room? No sign, no hint, of the Reich's glories! There was no newspaper to be seen — he would have clutched greedily at it — and only a select few books, mostly large, luxuriously bound volumes of art-reproductions and guides to the collection of antiques.

Affable, plainly eager to set his strange guest at ease, Feuerstein was chatting to him as his glass of water arrived on a silver tray. It was clear at once that he was a dealer in *objets d'art* and expected everyone else to share his passion for them. His dedication to the past was visible all around this room; there was nothing remotely "modern" in it except the televisor and radiogram, and even those were disguised in mock-antique cabinets.

Of all the filthy, horrible ill-luck! To wind up *here*, wasting a unique chance to gather information and report back to Wolfhaber and through him to the Führer!

But he must make the most of every slightest hint and clue, and here was one. Feuerstein was indicating what to Wentschler looked like a perfectly ordinary flower-vase on a low marble-topped table.

"That's one of my recent acquisitions," he was boasting. "Picked it up for a song! Stuff from the 1920's is due for a revival, mark my words. It isn't how old a piece is that turns it from a household commonplace into a valuable prize — it's how many are left, and things like this got smashed by the million, naturally."

Seizing his opening, Wentschler demanded, "And just how old is this particular item?"

His hopes of finding out what year this was, which he was forbidden to ask directly for fear of betraying his identity, were instantly dashed.

"It's marked 1928," Feuerstein said with a shrug, and at that moment the butler Franz caught his eye and he continued, "Ah, I see dinner is served. Herr Schmidt, will you take my wife in?"

Double doors on the far side of the anteroom were swung back. Revealed was a table set with fine silver and crystal, unlighted candles, loaves of bread of a curious braided design, and decanters of wine. A pretty girl in

maid's uniform, again a blonde, was waiting in the far corner by a laden sideboard.

Numbly, Wentschler allowed Frau Feuerstein to take his arm and guide him to the right-hand seat at the bottom of the table. The rest of the company followed and stood behind their chairs. The maid handed the hostess a lighted taper, and she applied a flame to each candle in turn until all were lit. There were seven. The electric lights were then turned out.

Feuerstein poured some wine into the glass that stood at his place, the head of the table, and said heartily, "We don't keep up the full observances, of course, not nowadays! But — 'Let melancholy and passion, born of spleen and bile, be banished from all hearts!"

He sipped the wine, making it a toast to the company, and everybody sat down, chatting merrily at once — except Wentschler. Some sort of liver pâté was served, with celery and olives and little crisp biscuits. It was good, if rich, and he forced himself to comment on it to the hostess, who was conversing with the black man on her other side.

Smiling, they both waited for him to say more.

"Ah..." He improvised a safe ploy. "And how are things in your part of the world?"

"Very good at present," Sikelole answered. "They were tough for a while, until the Boers came round, but now the universal-education program is under way, everybody's rather pleased. I'm lecturing in moral philosophy at the University of Cape Town, by the way."

Moral philosophy was a subject the general knew nothing about. Nor did he understand much about architecture, the profession of the Irishwoman sitting on his right, or abnormal pychology, specialty of Fräulein Dass, who sat on Sikelole's left — it seemed she was some kind of consultant at a mental hospital. To Wentschler, who believed that the insane should be liquidated if they could not be made to perform useful work, this was peculiarly anathematical.

Yet everyone else seemed ready and willing to discuss these and a hundred other subjects, arguing knowledgeably on all of them. Why in heaven's name would they not turn to something of real interest — recent history, above all?

Alert for the least snippet of data, Wentschler did pick up a few tantalizing clues: a summer holiday in New York last year, by a new high-speed trans-Atlantic plane; the comparative merits of Rolls-Royce and Packard cars; a miracle drug recently isolated from a South American plant, promising cures in previously intractable patients ... and that was where Wentschler's heart leapt up, for Fräulein Dass leaned towards Frau Feuerstein and with a dazzling smile inquired if it would be ungracious to ask to watch

the television news bulletin at ten o'clock, for there was to be a feature about this drug and the work of her hospital.

"Will you actually be appearing in it?" the hostess asked in high delight. "Yes? Then of course we must watch! I'll make sure we're through eating in good time."

A fish loaf with horseradish sauce succeeded the pâté, and the distraction served to cover Wentschler's excitement. A television news broadcast! Nothing could be better!

Relaxing for the first time, he decided he could after all risk at least one glass of wine without dulling his perception or judgment.

Also he rediscovered appetite and did justice to a soup with dumplings and a roast chicken with mixed vegetables and finally a dish of apples stewed with cinnamon and brown sugar. By now it was nearly ten, as reported by a grandfather clock in a corner of the dining room.

Frau Feuerstein signaled to her husband and rose.

"Let's take our coffee and brandy in the other room, so we can watch Anitra on television!"

Black coffee was poured out, and an excellent cognac, and cigars were offered to the men and cigarettes to the women. Wentschler paid no attention to this; his gaze was glued to the TV screen.

He was of course familiar with television; after all, it had only been last year that the Witzleben transmitter had been bombed out of service—

He caught himself. It had been in 1943. *Not* last year.

And that brought back all his misgivings, which had been temporarily masked by relief. Wolfhaber had mentioned inferior alternative futures; could this be one? If so, it implied that someone other than the Wissenschaft-SS had discovered time-travel, and he had been deliberately diverted. That made chills run down his spine. The notion of a war being fought on the battlefields of time—

But there was nothing of a wartime atmosphere about this house, or this city! One could hear normal traffic going by at intervals, though since his brief glimpse from the bedroom window he had had no chance to look outside. Anyhow, Feuerstein, consulting his watch, was turning on the TV.

"It won't be a very long item," Fräulein Dass was saying apologetically. "And it'll probably be well towards the end, so if you just want to leave the sound turned down—"

Wentschler's voice rasped across hers.

"If you will permit me, I should like to see the entire program! As you know, I've been abroad and — uh — I'm somewhat out of touch, so I try never to miss the news."

And returned to his chair as the screen lit, showing a clock face just

coming up to ten p.m. — and, marvel of marvels, in color! White, on a blue ground!

Soon, as bells chimed from the loudspeaker, the clock was replaced by a polychrome array of flags, and a superimposed sign said *Weltnachrichten — World News.*

Infuriatingly, there was no date.

Then suddenly Wentschler's fingers closed so tight on his brandy glass it almost cracked. He could see the Stars and Stripes, the Union Jack, the Tricolor, and a hundred more.

Where was the Reich's black swastika on white and red?

While he was still trying to persuade himself that it must be masked by the title card, an announcer started to list tonight's topics: a pan-European conference on the abolition of visas for foreign travel; a trade agreement with Brazil, signed in Rio; a new air-speed record; a visit by a troupe of Cossack dancers; a breakthrough in psychiatric medicine ("That's us!" Fräulein Dass exclaimed excitedly); and sports news, including film of a baseball game between Canada and Belgium for the world covered-stadium championship.

Baseball???

Sweating, furious, but maintaining impassivity, the general endured the trivial nonsense that flowed across the screen: mostly shots of dignitaries uttering formal platitudes in a mixture of languages, with German commentary. Not one of them wore uniform; they were all civilians. Then a white speck flashed across the screen, an aircraft at high altitude, after which engineers were seen inspecting a plane with both pusher and tractor airscrews, so much like the still-secret Dornier Do335 of his own day, Wentschler had to bite back an exclamation of horror ... but this was a Swedish design, the first to exceed the speed of sound.

Next came the dancers, and — horror of horrors! — they were performing against a red backdrop bearing a giant gold hammer and sickle!

"Herr Schmidt!" Feuerstein was whispering at his side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" the general forced out. It wasn't true. He was beginning to suffer abdominal cramps, and very shortly he was going to be driven from the room, but he dared not miss a moment of this shocking news bulletin.

"And now, from our scientific correspondent, an account of an astonishing new treatment for the mentally deranged. The following interview was filmed earlier today at the National Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

Views of a large modern building: staff escorting men and women in pajama-like uniforms; long wards with twenty beds a side; then three people sitting around a table, including Fräulein Dass, a little nervous man with the general appearance of an Armenian, and a black man who spoke with a strong American accent.

American???

Off-screen, the interviewer was

asking about this new and wonderful drug, and the little nervous man, prompted now and then by his colleagues, was explaining how it could cure hitherto untreatable megalomania, paranoia and obsessive behavior.

"You've had one really spectacular success, I gather," the interviewer said eventually. The three smiled proudly. The scene cut away to a man Wentschler recognized. Older — much older, with grey hair — and a deal slimmer, but absolutely unmistakable, in a dark uniform with a peaked cap, against a background of archeological exhibits. Clearly he was a museum guide; equally definitely, he was Hermann Göring....

Bile rose in Wentschler's throat as the scene reverted to the trio around the table. The black man was saying, "Yes, he's been working at the State Museum for three months now, with no sign of a relapse. Naturally the therapy will have to continue for a while yet, but he's adjusted splendidly. We even have hopes for Goebbels, you know."

The interviewer said, "And the arch-criminal?"

Shrugs from all three. Fräulein Dass said, "Well, of course his delusions were so heavily reinforced for such a long time by everybody who obeyed his lunatic orders ... but even in his case we haven't given up *all* hope."

"Thank you very much."

Back to the flags, and the commentator saying: "Now, sport—"

It was too much for Wentschler. His head was swimming and his bowels were griping. Rising to his feet, struggling to preserve a semblance of self-control, he looked a question at Feuerstein.

Divining his need, the host beckoned Franz.

With maddeningly deliberate strides the tall Aryan — servant, in God's name, *servant* to this brood of kikes and niggers and Lord knew what half-breeds! — showed him to a washroom on the far side of the hall. Such was his haste now, he could only slam, not bolt, the door before having to drag down his trousers and vent a gush of stinking liquid.

When were they going to haul him back to his own time? He could stand no more! This was torture beyond his worst nightmares!

Gradually the agony receded. Strains of lively music rang out again; doors were opened, and it sounded as though people were starting to dance on the tiled floor of the hall, more suitable than the carpet in the other rooms he had seen. He had sudden visions of one of them walking in, and reached hastily for the toilet roll, which was discreetly concealed inside a white plastic dispenser.

So that not until he drew down and tore off a couple of sheets did he realize that they, and all the rest, were stamped with the only swastikas he had seen since his arrival.

That was the breaking-point. That was when he screamed, and the butler

and underbutler entered and with brisk, impersonal efficiency strangled him into unconsciousness.

"Then," said Mr. Secrett, "he was given an injection to keep him under and driven in a car fitted with snow chains to the foot of a badly crevassed glacier. From there he was carried — Franz and his assistant were members of the Swiss mountain-rescue service, so his weight was no problem — about two hundred meters upward and dumped on a convenient ledge. It was over by dawn: the carefully constructed newsreel, incorporating footage from a science fiction film that nobody had seen because it had had to be abandoned at the outbreak of war, the soap wrapper, the toilet paper, all the little taunts and the final sledge-hammer blow, were destroyed, and the actors went back to their daily lives. Not, of course, that they were professionals. They were simply people who had nearly as much reason to hate the Nazis as the man who called himself Feuerstein, and not nearly as much money. The whole thing must have cost him at least a million pounds; think of the people he had to bribe, just to start with! But it was a very fair reprisal for what had been done, on Wentschler's orders, to his mother and father, and some of the touches I think were absolutely brilliant...."

We were now the only people in the breakfast room, and the staff were beginning to drop heavy hints. But even after Mr. Secrett had stopped

talking, I sat in dazed immobility. He was the first to stir.

"Well, old chap," he said, glancing at his watch, "I see I only have a few minutes to catch my bus back to Basel. I'm flying home today, back to the old grindstone, y'know."

"Wait!" I said frantically. "Who was Feuerstein really?"

"You can't expect me to tell you that! Anyhow, he's dead."

"Oh, marvelous!" I exclaimed, my visions of tracing and interviewing him gone up in smoke. "Then what proof do you have that this is the true story of Wentschler's fate?"

"None whatever, old man! I told you: anything that might have given the game away was destroyed. Even though the forecast was for snow, there was a chance that Wentschler might be found alive, and kidnapping an officer of the German forces would have been no small offense, Switzerland being a nonbelligerent."

"It did happen in Switzerland, then?"

"Where else? As I said, he saw there was no blackout and heard normal civilian traffic passing the house. *That* couldn't have been faked."

"So how in heaven's name did you find out about it?"

Mr. Secrett was gathering various belongings, ready to rise. For a moment a strange, almost wistful look crossed his face.

"Later on," he said almost reluctantly, "I contracted a — shall we say? — close friendship with one of the participants. We talked more freely to one another, I suppose, than I've ever done with anybody else ... but that too is history, and my bus is waiting. So long, old fellow — see you in London!"

And headed for the door.

A dozen questions were still fighting in my head for utterance, but I knew better than to try and delay him. Something in his attitude, though, hinted that he had still one more thing to say, as so often in the past.

I was right. He spun around and hurried back, his expression anxious.

"By the way, old man," he said in a low tone, "I didn't mean to imply that I don't feel at ease talking freely to *you*! I most certainly do, and there are damned few people I can say that about, I promise. Do come and see me when you can, or ask me to drop in. You know how much I'd appreciate it, don't you?"

I forced a nod and a smile, and he seized my hand and pressed it warmly, and was really gone. Until the next time.

What in the hell did I do to deserve Mr. Secrett?

Quill Tripstickler is the bumbling Galactic Tourist Agent whose first misadventure was described here in "Quill Tripstickler Eludes A Bride" (May 1980). In this new story, Quill heads for a suicide bar to drown his troubles, much to the dismay of his loyal robot servant, Fives....

Quill Tripstickler Out the Window

BY
JOHN SHIRLEY

"There are a variety of terms I might appropriately apply here," said Commissioner Feldspar ruminatively. "But I think *oafish stumblebum* has the right ring to it."

Quill cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. Actually, I think *honest misjudgment by a loyal—*"

"and yet," Feldspar went on, as if he hadn't heard, "*oafish stumblebum* hasn't the proper piquancy. Something more basic is called for. I have it! *Bumbling clod*! That's it! You, Quill Tripstickler, are a Bumbling Clod. At best."

"Yes, sir," said Quill meekly. He winced when he heard Feldspar's pet duck snickering in the corner. He despised poultry — the profusion of poultry, the one remaining sort of domestic animal in the 25th century, was the bane of Earth, and it almost made Quill wish he hadn't come back to his home planet. As an agent of the Galactic Tourist Agency, his duty was in the stars — there were some things a field agent could not explain to a desk operative, it seemed. He should never have returned. Should have made his report by tachyon transmish. But Father Tripstickler had insisted, and Quill still stood in fear of that fearsome patriarch. That's just how Quill thought of his father, except that he thought it: FEARSOME PATRIARCH. And it seemed then that Feldspar had been possessed by Father Tripstickler's own spirit — Quill's father was by no means deceased, but that didn't prevent him liberally spreading his Spiritual Influence about — when he thundered: "And I want you to know I don't think much of that snooty cybernetic valet of yours. In fact, I think robots are a pain in the pacemaker. *Yours* is always complain-

ing. Well, I'm going to be rid of you and your robot, Tripstickler. You're both *fired!*" He emphasized the word with glee and with the slap of his palm on the glass desk (which was also a miniature henhouse — Feldspar's house was crowded). Quill straightened, trying to regain his dignity, wishing he could sit — let Feldspar stand awhile! Quill opened his mouth to protest. But Feldspar, shaking his jowls, his dim blue eyes narrowed, bulled on: "How do you excuse going to a colony of religious celibates and promptly seducing the Queen's parthenogenic child and nearly starting an intersteller war? How in Tallahassee Florida the princess could find a human platypus like yourself attractive is quite beyond me. Did you erotigas her? Is that it, hm?"

"Erotigas? Certainly not, sir! I hold Winner's Ribbons in all classes of Seduction and Erotic Conduct, sir!" Quill was deeply offended by Feldspar's use of the term "human platypus." True, Quill was oddly proportioned. And, true, he had a large nose. Well, yes, it was a *very* large nose. His long neck, weak chin, large spreading nose — which inelegant dullards insisted on referring to as a *beak* — gave him a slightly ducklike appearance. And since cerebrally evolved ducks had become so common, some oaf was always drawing the comparison. Gangly, gawky, pout-lipped, beaked as he was, still Quill refused a body-rebuild. Strangely, he firmly believed that he was Devilishly Handsome.

He ran a hand through his thin brown curls and tried to assume a tone of reasonableness. "My assignment, Commissioner Feldspar, was to introduce tourism into the planet Nunneras. The Nunneras Gardens are famous the galaxy over — by rumor, and a few tri-D photos. It was a difficult negotiation to undertake, since the Nunnerans believe that all offworlders are of Satanic origin. I felt I needed someone on the inside to suggest to the Queen that she trust me. A Galactic Tourist Agent must occasionally take bold steps, sir. And, to be perfectly honest, the princess seduced *me* — naturally I turned this intimacy to the good of the agency. Or sought to do so — until the Queen discovered that ... well, sir, I barely escaped with my life ... I—"

"Oafish stumblebum." Feldspar's body-rebuilt face had badly gone to sag; it was supposed to resemble Julius Caesar, but it more closely befit Nero. And now it was bright red with fury. "Bumbling..." Feldspar's invectives came like the rumbles of a volcano building to eruption. "Moronic..." He drew a deep breath for: *"Oafish stumbling bumbling CLOD!"*

As Quill left the room ... as Quill *beat it hastily* from the room, Feldspar sent his oversized (bigger than two fat geese together) pet duck to chivvy him. Ducks had always provoked in Quill a thrill of revulsion. He ran from the house, the duck quacking at his heels, snapping at his ankles, squawk-

ing, "Quan quon't quaum quack!"*

Quill sat in the cool dimness of The Terminus. It was a suicide bar, designed to appeal to those surfeited with existential ennui. And it attracted the *victimizers*, a breed of bar-haunter emerged to accommodate those preferring to die at another's hands.

From somewhere droned a dolorous funereal muzak. Quill sighed, his sigh harmonizing with numerous other sighs along the bar; he signaled the bartender (whose lifelike black eyes seemed forever sympathetic and welling with tears). "Toxic or nontoxic, sir?" asked the bartender.

"For the moment, nontoxic. I'll have a Cable TV Cocktail."

The bartender nodded and caressed a keyboard. A glass emerged from a slot in the bar, a wire affixed to its underside; the green liquid in the glass contained a tiny three-dee image of a man poised on a window ledge, about to leap into oblivion, as a crowd at nearby windows begged him to reconsider. Quill sighed, and sipped. The drink tasted of liquor, mint — and blood mixed with concrete, plus a suggestion of sweat. There was, too, a savor of distilled desperation.

"Master Quill?"

Quill winced. He knew whose voice he was hearing. He preferred to ignore it. Perhaps it would go away.

But Fives cleared his throat — more accurately, he made a noise that was a theatrical approximation of throat clearing, since he hadn't a throat to clear. Robots have no need of an esophagus. "Master Quill, your father sent me to seek you. He bids you to 'buck up and take heart.' He asked me to remind you of that immemorial Tripstickler aphorism — from Sayings of Father Tripstickler, Selection Ninety-six — to wit: 'When a Tripstickler is down he can always take heart/ he knows that his end is really his start.' Stirring words, sir, if I may say so. Words that stir the—"

"Then you may take those words," Quill said miserably, "and stir them up, drink them, and gag on them. I'll drink to *that*." He took another sip of his Cable TV Cocktail. He frowned and changed the taste-channel, twisting the knob on the side of the glass. The image in the liquid swirled, blurred, changed, reforming into a troupe of briefly clad dancing girls. Quill tasted the drink and almost smiled.

But he couldn't smile. He was ruined. His father had believed in him, had paid for his two years at the Tourist Agent Training School. The Dear Old Man. It had been costly trainig. And his father had bought him his own Agent's Starcruiser (second-hand). A fine gesture from a Grand Old Man. And his father had given him Fives....

"Meddling Old Fool," Quill murmured, frowning.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Fives asked softly, rolling nearer.

"Nothing..." Quill sighed. "I am an

*Translation from the duck argot of Quill's time: "And don't come back!"

ingrate. Calling my father names, when I have let him down. After all he's done for me. Put me through agent's school — and now I'm fired." He took a long pull at his drink and blinked. The combination alcohol and opiate in the drink was beginning to have its effect. "My whole career down the Disposetron.... Well, I've come here to find Peace."

"Surely not, Master Quill!" Fives rocked back on his single wheel in simulated (or was it real?) astonishment, shaking his lifelike head in gentle reproach. Fives was styled to resemble, from the waist up, an early-twentieth-century Gentleman's Gentleman. He rarely removed the black bowler hat — which was more than it seemed — from his round British-style head. He pinched his florid synthaflesh nose in dismay — one of the *charming personality gestures* the brochure on this model robot had listed — and arched his eyebrows quizzically. The *quizzical arching of eyebrows* was another programmed charming personality gesture. Quill didn't find it charming. And somehow he sensed the Fives' personality went beyond programming. The robot had a number of annoying habits all his own invention. For example, his way of hooking a lifelike thumb in his waistcoat watchpocket, straightening on the single wheel at the bottom of his inverted-cone brushed-aluminum undersides, tugging the tails of his coat-and-tails with his other hand, causing his brown eyes to sparkle, his ruddy English cheeks to become ruddier, as he recited:

"A Tripstickler looks to see who's downwind
Before he loosens his belt;
He thinks of others before himself,
Of their skins before his own pelt."

Quill winced again. "Don't *do* that, Fives. You do it to torment me."

"I beg your pardon, sir. Master Quill — do you know which bar this is?"

"Do you think I'm blind? I saw the sign. It's The Terminus."

"I mean, sir — do you know what *sort* of bar this is?"

Quill's nod was somber, his expression maudlin in its celebration of misery. "It's a suicide bar."

"But Master Quill — The Terminus is a pick-up bar, begging your pardon, sir. One goes to such a place..." Fives looked furtively around at the other denizens of the gloomy bar and lowered his voice. "...One comes to such a place to meet someone. A partner. Someone to kill oneself with. Or someone to do the deed. And there are those who—"

"I'm aware of all that," said Quill in a voice awry with drink. "I came here a victim. A voluntary victim, seeking a ... a victimizer." He sniffed (the sniff reverberated in the voluminous echo-chamber of his nose) and looked up and down the bar as if pondering the options.

The shadowy chamber was hung with black translucent scarves. Over

the bar was a human skull, fleshless except for two heavy-lidded eyes leaking tears.

The figures at the bar were studies in quiet misery. Self-pity spoke itself in every man or woman's body language.

There were those, however, standing against the walls in gloomy corners, whose red-glowing cocktails signified their preference: they were victimizers, licensed, looking for voluntary victims.

One of them was looking Quill up and down. And smiling.

His smile showed his teeth. Big teeth, rebuilt in three sharp rows like a shark's. Quill had heard that some of the victimizers were cannibals. The law gave them the right to do as they pleased with the bodies....

Quill looked hurriedly away. And then he saw her.

She was a four-footer. All four of her feet were lovely. But she was two meters tall, measuring from the spike-heeled feet of her front set of legs to the top of her delicately boned black-maned head. He had only seen a femitaur once before, at the Conference on Interdimensional Travel. Quill had found them quite attractive, much to the dismay of his peers. "You've got odd tastes in women, Tripstickler," they'd said. But something about the sweep of the lovely, quite human, womanly upper half of the femitaur, the curve of that back arcing neatly into the equine lower back ... something in the perfect melding of the back parts of horse and woman ... something about her two pairs of shapely woman's legs (woman's legs, horse's torso, human feminine derriere but for the small flickering tail) and the fine black felt-like fur beginning just beneath the upper waist ... the antelope's tail ... the pointed, upturned breasts, the oval eyes....

"Fives...."

"Sir?"

"Did you, ah, notice the femitaur in the corner, Fives? The only alien here. Notice the red-glow drink in her hand.... Is she not lovely?"

"A splendid example of her species, sir. Lovely large brown eyes, sir. But something in the way she is perusing you, sir, strikes me as — to be perfectly candid — hungry."

"Women of all persuasions look at me hungrily, Fives," said Quill with garish urbanity, bobbling his eyebrows and his crab-apple lump of an Adam's apple, "for I am 'one who is catnip to women.' Do you read the ancient writers, Fives? That's Mencken. And look at her! The sweep of her back, her upper back at a strict ninety-degree angle from her lower. Her quivering, perfect—"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but don't you think we'd best *exeunt*? If you are to convince Commissioner Feldspar to give you a second chance, you must—"

"It's useless, Fives. It would take a miracle. It needs a legend-making coup in Galactic Tourist Agenting." Once again Quill was plunged into gloom.

"Suicide then, sir? Very good, sir. As you say. I suppose there are certain employment alternatives open to me I could explore. In fact—"

"I'm going to get drunk," Quill interrupted. "and then I shall stride manfully up to her, and ask her — nay, I shall implore her poetically — to kill me.... You know Fives, I've heard that to travel into the alternate universe in which the femitaurs live is to embrace death. If she personifies the death that one embraces, then that embrace is no longer repellent to me. Ah! How despair infuses the soul with poetry! Ah ... the story goes that one steps into the transporter and emerges into their world, gasping with disbelief at the beauty beheld there — this by neutrino-transmission devices the explorer carries, sending messages back as he goes — ah, as I said, he gasps at the beauty and explodes! Instant death. If I could find a way to take tourists to the world of the femitaurs, *safely*, I would be a legend among tourist agents.... The femitaurs themselves seem confused when trying to explain the phenomena and their own interdimensional transport. No one has yet fathomed them; they talk cryptically of Death Itself.... They can visit us but we cannot visit them.... They come here rarely. Understandable. There is a communication gap between the femitaurs and ourselves. But the language of death, Fives, is universally understood everywhere. If she is here, in a suicide bar, then the language of death—" Quill spoke with a dramatic flourish, waving his hand in the air over his head, drunkenly orating to some invisible audience of admirers, "—is the language we speak together."

He turned to reel toward the femitaur. He stumbled into Fives and tangled his feet trying to recover. He pitched to his belly. "Umph ... oafish stumblebum," Quill murmured muzzily. "Bumbling clod of a robot! Oafish stumbling—"

The man with the large teeth, drawing a cloak of flayed human skin about him, strode to Quill's side, bending to assist him to his feet. "Really my man," he said, "you ought to find a better way to off yourself than stumbling to death."

"Not usedtuh Cabble ... cobble ... cubical ... Cable TV Cocktails," Quill said, sitting heavily on a barstool.

"The best way to die," said the swarthy stranger with a wolfish smile, "is at the hands of an expert. There will be no fee. It will be quick — but poignant. Painless — but evocative. Firm — but artful." He placed an arm about Quill's shoulders. His red eyes glittered. "*Trust* me."

Quill's throat was dry.

"We'll go somewhere else," the dark man went on. "Somewhere private."

"Oh — I think not," said Quill politely. "I rather think, that is, that is to say, I mean to say, ah...."

"Oh, I *see*," said the victimizer, "You are a man whose taste runs to

public self-destruction. Charming!" The dark man's hands closed round Quill's throat. Long-fingered, hard-muscled hands with black-painted fingernails tightened. Quill wheezed.

"Here now!" said the robot bartender, rolling up from the other end of the bar. His realistic head, shaped like Gary Gilmore's for historical atmosphere, shook disapprovingly. "No suiciding or victimizing in the bar! Take it outside! Meet 'em here but don't eat 'em here!"

"Chalky? Is that you?" Fives asked, bending toward the bartender. "Sounds like your voice. They haven't altered that. But this distasteful new head...."

"Fives! Good to see you! Got a new gig, I see! Valet? Yes, it's me. Say, Fives old man, whatever happened with that job you had pretending to admire the inferiority complexes for some therapeutic clinic—?"

"A curious story, that one," said Fives, "Beginning some years ago on the Beauty Spa planet Aphfreudite—"

"Fives!" Quill called hoarsely, clawing to pry the hands of the victimizer from his throat. "Help!' The victimizer was dragging Quill by the neck across the floor toward the door of the bar. Quill's heels scraped the floor. He struggled feebly.

"What's that? Oh, a moment, Master Quill, I'll be right there. Ran into an old friend here," he called over his shoulder. He turned to the bartender. "I'll have to attend to this, Chalky. The young master has a way of getting himself throttled at regular intervals.... But, tell me, what became of that lovely self-lubricator you used to have...."

"Fives!" Quill was blacking out, felt himself towed as if he were already a corpse....

"Release this one." A strange, melodious voice. "He and I have a pact: and agreement of intersecting gazes. He is mine."

Quill looked up, blinking away a red fog, to see the four pairs of ladylegs upholding the femitaur who now stood beside him. Her hooves grew naturally to resemble black spike heels. It was with one of these that, turning her back, she kicked the victimizer in his gut. The man made an expectorant sound, wheezed, and fell back, fingers unwrapping from Quill's throat. Gratefully, Quill gulped air and got to his feet.

The victimizer stood, snarling, and reached for a weapon beneath his cloak.

A black bowler hat, descending from the shadowy ceiling, fired a bolt of blue light from its silk-lined interior. His eyes crossed, his knees buckled, and he fell heavily to the floor, unconscious.

"You were always a mean shot with a paralyzer, Fives my lad," Chalky called from the bar.

"I'm grateful, my lady," said Quill, pointedly ignoring Fives and trying to regain his dignity, bowing with a flourish.

"I have need of one who will give

his life. One unfearing death," she said, her voice like wind through the spires of another world.

"My lady, I have been dishonored with failure. My life is nothing. I am yours to do with as you will."

"Call me Ilana. Come."

Ilana led them into the street; all were careful to step on the supine victimizer.

Quill turned to Fives. "Fives, you are a disrespectful bounder. However, our association has on occasion been fruitful. I suppose I...." His voice broke. He sniffed and pretended sternness.

"Send my body, Fives, to my father, and wrap me all in black silks, cover me with nodes of onyx and stones from the deeps of the sea...."

For some minutes they endured one of Quill's orations, until Fives broke in. "Actually, sir, I rather thought I might send the body to Nunneras."

"*What?*"

"Well, best to make the most of a sad duty, sir. And it seems to me I recall that the Nunnerans have a legend. 'One from the stars will come, and he will be rebuked. He shall find death, and he will return from death, bringing his Word of a new age and a new Way.' Part of the research you asked me to do on Nunneras, Master Quill. We could send them your body, explain that you had killed yourself because you had 'converted' to their religion; your suicide was an act of martydom and faith ... and perhaps we could arrange to create an illusion, bringing you 'back to life' with a hologram.... The hologram — a technology with which the backward, atavistic Nunnerans are unfamiliar — would naturally advise them that the time has come to open their planet to travelers from other worlds. We don't have to call them tourists — pilgrims! And—"

"Just how would this serve *you*, Fives? You are merely my assistant. Why would you engineer this, once I'm dead?"

Fives looked apologetic. "The new equal rights for robots laws, sir, state that a robot can become, among other things, a free tourist agent, if he proves that—"

"Why—! Of all the—! Fives, that's perfectly ghoulish! Using my dead body to make a career for yourself." He put an affectionate hand on Fives' shoulder. "I see you've learned something from our association, old boy."

On the way to the corner they encountered a dozen pet owners, ostentatiously walking their poultry. Quill wrinkled his nose — two or three people looked up when he did this, since his nose was prodigious, the wrinkling seeming to profoundly revise a major feature of the street's architecture.

"Oh, it's just a nose," said a fat man walking a duck. "I thought they were tearing down a building—"

"Your duck," said Quill, "is offensive to me. The animals are loathsome." They walked on, side-stepping

outsized ducks, chickens, geese, and an occasional turkey, all leashed. The squawking and cackling competed with the noise of breezecars whining by on their sparkling magnetic fields. The moraines of duck droppings contrasted with the clean planes of glassteel comprising the buildings around them. Someone's duck tugged its leash from the roboserv walking it and waddled aggressively at Quill, squawking, "Quey! I quot I quold choo kwuh queat it!"

It snapped at Quill's ankles. Quill kicked at it, and it fluttered aside, squalling.

"You need diction lessons." Quill said, addressing the duck. "Try saying it again, like this: 'Hey! I thought I told you to beat it!'" He kicked at the duck again, which ran to the protection of its hourglass-shaped roboserv. "Menace to the public health," Quill murmured bitterly. "That's Commissioner Feldspar's duck, Fives. Why don't you see if you can run it over?"

"I fear not, sir," said Fives politely. "Commissioner Feldspar may soon be my employer."

Quill groaned. He turned to Ilana. "Have you ducks in your plane of reality?"

She smiled and shook her head, paused to rub one of her four spike-hooved feet on another, her tail flouncing merrily. "Fortunately, brave one, we have no giant talking ducks, nor ducks of any sort."

"It wasn't always like this, Ilana," Quill said. He was striding steadily now; the imbroglio in The Terminus had sobered him up. "But because of a peculiar ecological imbalance, the only domestic animals which remain on Earth are poultry. Cats and dogs once were populous, but when they evolved and gained self-awareness, they killed one another off in wars. And the cockroaches exterminated the rats, of course. Genocide, pure and simple. Still, I've no complaint with cockroaches. They're mild-mannered, as long as they're well-fed and unthreatened. They're not esthetically pleasing to look upon, of course, although they dress well. But somehow I like them better at four feet high as opposed to the little ones. Interesting culture they have. A matriarchy, you know. If, ah, I haven't got to kill myself right away, we might take a detour through the cockroach ghettos. I know a little sidewalk stand where they sell marvelous grub-excretion patties—"

"No, we will be late for the gateway, my brave one," said Ilana, caressing Quill's cheek with one of her long six-fingered hands. "Better we not side-traipse into cockroach ghettos, no matter how picturesque, courageous one."

"Your form of address is appropriate," said Quill. "Since my courage is celebrated in myths and—"

"Indeed," Fives put in, "it is mythical."

"I mean to say," Quill said hastily, glaring at Fives, "that it is the stuff of

legends. But of course there are times when the strongest of men wonder if plunging thoughtlessly into the unknown is wisest. There is more than a modicum of wisdom in the expression, 'discretion is the better part of valor.'"

"Is that the expression, sir?" Fives asked as if genuinely perplexed. "I thought the expression was something to do with 'cold feet.'"

Ilana turned her lovely head to gaze at Quill quizzically. "You mean you do not intend to seek honor and peace in death?"

Quill took a deep breath. "Ah. But of course, of course, I ... however, ah...." He closed his eyes. And shrugged. "Very well. Let us have done with it. I cannot face my father after my disgrace."

They had come to a busy intersection. It was a truck route. Huge grey-metal and plastiflex-jointed freight trucks growled along on blue-sparking magnetic fields. Except for the lack of wheels and diesel, semi-trucks had not changed significantly since the twentieth century. They were still quintessentially brutish. Quill swallowed hard and took a step back from the curb. "Ilana ... you don't propose to...?"

Ilana was gazing down the long street to the right, searchingly, as if looking for just the proper truck.

"There!" she exclaimed. "That one will do nicetude. Yes." She took a timepiece from a slit in the skin between her breasts. "Fifty seconds," she said.

"A religious ritual, I assume," said Quill aside to Fives. "She has to kill me in accordance with the proper astrological conjunction, perhaps." He chewed at a thumbnail.

"Kill you?" She turned to Quill. "I too shall die. We together."

"Both of us?" Quill was both saddened and heartened.

He looked at the trucks; they were like organized avalanches. He considered. He looked away. "Perhaps we should go into yon refreshment haven and reconsider our course...."

He turned to go.

She took him by the hand and stepped in front of a truck, dragging Quill with her. The truck bore mightily down on them, unable to stop in time, blasting out a warning. "Ah, well," Quill said at the last moment, "better death than to live in a world infested with ducks." He glimpsed Fives waving his bowler hat goodbye....

The truck hit them. It made them broken, battered things.

Quill Tripstickler, run over by a truck.

The somber procession wound its way through the garlanded streets of Pious, the capital of Nunneras. On one side were the Nunneras men wearing their long-skirted nun's habits, groaning as they lashed themselves with penitati flails, heads bowed. On the other side of the street were the Nunneras women (the two genders kept always

to their own sides of the streets and to their special dormitories, lest they should brush elbows or come into some other heinous physical contact) in black-leather priest's cassocks. Everyone native to Nunneras, excepting the royal family, had had their lips removed. It was a city of enforced grimaces.

But in splendid disavowal of soberness the famous Nunneras Gardens, the population's only sanctioned means of life-expressiveness, bloomed to either side of every street, in the narrow plots between the wooden walks and the roughly built dorm buildings. Some of the flowers were huge and gaudy, some small and exquisitely subtle in shadings of hue; they twined and bunched and waved in rows, arabesques, geometrical intricacies and — not surprisingly in the suppressive social atmosphere — designs which an objective eye would recognize as genital. Here and there topiaries of blue-green added dignity to the riotous display. Nunneras' temperate climate made it possible for flowers to bloom, with species alternating, all year round.

Fives, riding on the center float of the procession beside the glass casket containing Quill's body, observed the gardens with pleasure. His optical filters were opened wide, his olfactory sensors were fully dilated.

On the flower-encrusted float ahead of Fives', in papal robes and gloriously the centerpiece of a purple whiskerbloom floral arrangement, sat the Queen Collana and her daughter Enrilla. They were not lipless; both were tall, cloudy-haired and lithesomely personable. Enrilla looked uncomfortable in her ermine robes — it was a hot day — as she turned in her gilded chair to stare wistfully at the supine and cosmetically rebuilt (but quite dead) body of Quill Tripstickler. The Queen frowned sternly at her daughter; Enrilla turned away. The two figures swayed with the marching rhythm of the littermen bearing them.

Fives too turned to sadly contemplate the body of his erstwhile master. He took little satisfaction in his impending promotion. He would never have admitted as much to Quill, but he wished his master alive.

On the front end of the casket hung a huge placard containing a testimonial to Quill, cunningly scribed with marsh-blossom petals, scarlet against white:

A SATANIC CHILD OF EARTH FOUND FAITH
FAR FROM NUNNERAS
AND GAVE HIS LIFE IN MARTYRDOM
AND PERFECT CONTRITION,
SEEKING REPENTANCE. IN DEATH HE IS
REDEEMED.

"Blessed are the self-destructive," Fives murmured, "for they are harmless to the State."

Nunneras had been far from Quill's thoughts at the moment of his death. Fives had not been programmed to lie. But somehow he had learned to lie beautifully.

Quill sat up, smiling.

He looked around. He felt giddy and clean and new. He *was* new.

About him stretched radial avenues of blue-green grass, neatly clipped, and thickly twining jade-colored leafy vines. The vines clung thickly to colonnades, and to columns supporting the grass-draped ceiling. The only relief from the green color-scheme was in the white columns and thin streams of sparkling blue water. The place was like a vast cathedral inwardly coated with greenery, with six hallways extending in spokes from the center-sward. The center-sward was occupied only by Quill and Ilana. Ilana got to her four feet and, in her peculiar way, stretched.

"Even the ceiling," Quill said wonderingly, looking up. The long blades of grass hung like mermaid's hair in the mist from the narrow waterfalls tinkling down here and there. "Are we — are we on the planet Nunneras? It's a garden planet, and this is a marvelous garden."

Bending to tear handfuls of grass, which she raised to her lips and chewed thoughtfully, Ilana shook her head. "This is my world. A world parallel to yours. A lovely world...." There was a note of sadness in her voice.

"Your world?" Quill was surprised. "But — are we not dead? I remember that the truck struck us squarely and with great force." He shuddered. "This, then, is the Afterworld?"

"Afterworld? Paradise? Not in the sense you mean. This is our variant of Earth. And though you had to die to come here, you are not dead. You are not disembodied. This is not the afterlife, my brave Quill. It is your life, in another space-time continuum, after the radical transition resembling Death. Truly, you left a dead body behind on Earth. But the InterEarth transportation process did not destroy you — the body you now inhabit is an exact copy of the one left behind. Even your clothes — everything within your bioplasmic field has been copied, reconstituted, into an identical vehicle for your consciousness."

Quill looked down at himself. "I am the same? Not a hair amiss? You're quite sure? Nothing but an exact duplicate will do, you know. I was made in the finest way of the finest stuff — nothing but the finest will do—"

"You are precisely the same. Simply ... newer. Your consciousness, your memories, the sum of your personality — all this was transmitted here, to the body you now inhabit, by means of neutrino interpenetration...."

Quill struggled to understand. "Death — death is the means of travel from my world to this Other Earth?"

"Only *certain* deaths. It must occur in the right place, at the right time, with the right means. Most deaths will launch you into the plane of the disembodied. Die at the proper time and place — and you arrive here. Now and then one of your people stumbles through, to a new body automatically awaiting them; they are channeled by

certain magnetic polarities to this spot, this reception hall, blundering into our world via the right death. They had inadvertently stepped in front of the right truck or charging elephant...."

Quill was dazed. "I remember no pain."

"There was no pain — because I held your hand. I took control of your nervous system at the last moment and dampened your pain. It is a skill those of us specializing in transition have learned...."

"But — what of those who were destroyed on their arrival here?"

"They came through an electronic Interdimensional Breacher. The wrong means. The dimensional dynamics will not allow this means for the transition between your world and mine. They must come through the right channels or not at all...."

"But *why?*"

"Why is it that when you step off a cliff you fall and are crushed? Why aren't you crushed when you reach the bottom by walking down the trail? The dynamics of your world's physical laws. The *why* of such laws are always a mystery. One can only theorize uselessly."

"The gateway to your world..." Quill mused, "is getting run over by a truck?"

"It need not have been a truck. We needed crushing, in that time and place."

"Crushing?" Quill stood, rubbing his chin speculatively. "We might build Interdimensional Gateways at the assigned spots — you could inform us of these. And, at the calculated instants, we could bring crowds of tourists into your world — by crushing them instantaneously in a huge and quick metal vise. We could anesthetize them first ... But how would they return?"

"We push them out windows," said Ilana. "Specific windows for specific destinations. There is a window assigned — most of them are not in use, as yet — for each inhabited world in your Universe's civilized galaxy."

"Yes? Have you one for the planet Nunneras?"

"We do."

"Indeed ... do you think I could get the cooperation of your government in setting up tourist arrival centers?"

"Yes. You are now inhabiting just such a terminal. This reception hall was prepared specially in anticipation of tourists from your world.... We need the revenue tourists would bring ... and we brought you here to show you our method of transition as quickly and economically as possible, so you could arrange matters at the other end of the spectrum, brave one."

"I shall inspect your world, and then we shall make the arrangements," said Quill loftily. "I'll return by way of Nunneras — can you arrange for a specific spot on Nunneras?"

"Yes. When you go, simply visualize another living being of the world you seek: you will be reconstituted beside that being."

"Good. My servant is on Nunneras. I will wish to confer with him—" He smiled thinly. "And to startle the treacherous blackguard. Now...."

"Let us not go from this place hastily, comely one." She gathered Quill into her arms.

"The others of my species," she said, whispering into his ear as she stroked him — and as he returned her caresses — "think that my tastes are odd: I seem to be attracted to spindly big-nosed bipeds."

"We all have our ... our eccentric tastes," Quill said, tracing her hindparts with an exploratory hand.

"Let us tarry here awhile, before we tour the rest of my Earth," she said. Her tone was wistful.

Quill tarried, and he tarried gladly.

...But the time came when Ilana took Quill by the hand and escorted him down a green-blue misty avenue until they came to a metal door set into a wall of harsh black stone. The door seemed, to Quill, rather anomalously pragmatic in its verdant surroundings.

Ilana turned a wheel and opened the door. Quill followed her through. The door, with a will of its own, shut behind them. It locked.

They were in a large room walled with white plastic and lined with aluminum shelves. On the shelves were glossy grey boxes perforated with thousands of tiny, almost microscopic, pinholes. The boxes were all alike and each a little bigger than a man's head. At the other end of the rectangular room was another metal door.

From the door came a droning and the thunder of many hooves.

Ilana turned to Quill and spoke something he suspected was learned by rote. "Wear one of these perceptual-enhancement boxes and the native beauty of my Earth will be enhanced a thousandfold. And you will be able to communicate with others across the world as you choose, simply by tonguing the correct combination on your selector...."

She selected a box with an extra bulge at one face, presumably to accommodate Quill's nose. She approached him. He backed away.

Quill acted on instinct. He rushed to the opposite door, turned its wheel, and threw it open. He perceived a typical Other Earth street.

It was crowded, shoulder to shoulder, chest to tail, with femitaurs and manitaurs and, here and there, human men and women. All were dingy, nude or dressed in rags, sticky with some unguessable filth. The street was cracked, oozing with excretions, running with vermin moving too quickly to identify. A stench of unwashed billions assailed Quill's sensitive nostrils. All seemed thin, patchy, and in ill-health.

And every single being on the street....

Each one....

"They've all got *boxes* on their heads," Quill said in horror. He turned to Ilana. She had already fitted a box

over her head. It completely enclosed her head, fitting snugly shut under her chin, close around her neck.

She held a box out to Quill.

He shook his head. Strong arms closed around him from behind. Manitaurs with boxes on their heads — they seemed to have boxes instead of heads, unless one looked closely — held Quill pinioned while Ilana approached him with the box, opening it at the bottom, tilting its two halves away from one another to admit his head....

"I rather thought the business about your wanting tourist revenue sounded specious," said Quill, stalling. "I strongly suspect you want to leave your world. And something in the nature of the interdimensional dynamics prevents your leaving for long unless you trade places with someone from *our* world, yes? You can visit us — but to stay, one of us must take your place here ... yes?" She nodded. Quill went on, "Well, you've made a grisly mess of your world and *you* must live in it — we won't take your place. We have our own mess. You can keep yours, we'll keep ours."

"I'm sorry, Quill," said Ilana, her voice coming to him electronically from within the box she poised over his head. "We meant to put a box on your head before you saw what it's really like out there. Once the box is on, you won't notice the real world. At least, the boxes will mitigate its overcrowded ugliness. The world will look lovely to you — once your will buckles. Your physical sensations, your perceptions — all will be altered. The box contacts certain centers of your brain.... You'll see an infinite vista of paradisiac greenery and only a few of those persons standing close to you. You'll be fed through tubes that ... but no need to explain. You shall see."

Quill struggled uselessly. The box closed over his head.

Darkness. And then the small trivid screens inside flickered alive. The illusions began. He felt ectoplasmic fingers probing his brain.... He raised his hands to his head and felt his nose, his eyes ... all through a layer of fuzziness. "I know the box is there," he said. "The illusion makes me think I'm feeling my own head. The box warps my perceptions. I'll remember that."

"You'll remember it for a *while*," she said. "But soon ... after a few weeks...."

"I suppose you think to use this to brainwash me ... so that you can use me to lure tourists here .. so you can box them, too, and take their places. You hope to program me so that you can send me to my world and.... You *are* hearing me, aren't you? You see, I'm on to your plan, and it isn't going to work. You can't program me when I'm aware of it — so, I can resist it.... Best we forget the whole thing. Forgive and forget. I'm willing to, ah...."

He seemed to see her standing before him, smiling, shaking her head ruefully. "Time will change you."

"You're mad if you think our tour-

ists will stand for this," he said. "They're not *that* stupid."

"Your tourists stand for group tours, don't they? Tourists everywhere have been conditioned for centuries to believe that abuse is a condition of stimulating travel."

She had a point. Quill could not deny it.

But he broke from his guards and tried to break down the door leading into the glade of green grass and clean columns and crystal waterfalls....

The manitaurs stampeded. He felt himself trampled under hooves shaped like jogging shoes.

Fives frowned, inspecting the circuitry behind the hidden panel in the interior of his bowler hat. His hologram projector didn't seem to be working. He glanced up, wondering if he were about to be evicted.

He was in danger of being evicted from the entire planet.

Fives had been told that, as an emissary of the dead Redeemed Hero, Quil Tripstickler, he might be allowed to remain on Nunneras for ten hours. Nine hours had passed since his arrival. The Queen did not approve of soulless machinery that acted as if it had a soul. If Fives could not produce his miracle, he would soon be taken by force to his starcruiser. Or perhaps to a recycling plant....

He reflected that he might have made a mistake, in hinting to the Queen that a miraculous resurrection of their new martyr was imminent. It might have been better to spring the scam on them out-of-the-hat, as it were. They'd accepted without argument Fives' faked holotapes seeming to depict Quill's conversion to Nunneranism. But now the Queen eyed Fives with what was probably mounting scepticism.

Fives stood outside the crypt containing Quill's body. The crypt was an oval whose nearer end was shaped like the blossom of a Nunneran orchid. The Divine Family and their gloomily caparisoned retinue stood on the steps leading up to the crypt, to Fives' right, heads bowed, praying. A crowd of the Nunneran populace had gathered in the square below the steps, men to the left side, in habits, women to the right, in leather cassocks; all droned in prayer. The sun beat down, the air was heavy with blossom scent.

The Queen raised her head. The prayers ended. The ceremony was done. The martyr was buried. The Queen turned to gaze at Fives expectantly. Fives smiled, wondering if he could summon his ship's shuttle before the guards converged on him. The look in the Queen's eye presaged more than eviction. It was a this-robot-has-been-playing-us-for-fools-and-I-say-we-melt-him-down look.

She turned to the nun-habited guards and spoke to them in a whisper, gesturing toward Fives. The guards reached into belt pouches containing

Brissic spores. They'd throw spore-packed capsules at Fives, the capsules would burst, the spores would come into contact with air and, in the rude and impertinent manner of Brissic spores everywhere, they'd burst into root-base foam which would cover him in seconds, hardening instantly into an unbreakable shell....

It has already been noted that Fives had no esophagus. Hence, he was unable to experience a lump of fear in his throat. But it is inaccurate to maintain that a robot cannot feel fear. Fives began to overheat with anxiety.

But between Fives and the oncoming guards, a vision interposed itself.

To Five's surprise, a perfectly serviceable hologram of Quill appeared on the steps, blinking confusedly. The holo-image swayed, pulled its nose (causing this monumental facial feature to waggle obscenely when it was released) and belched. Fives found these actions disturbing. He had not programmed the hologram to do these things. Nor had he programmed it to say:

"The pain's gone. The box is gone. The world is made over again. I'm new."

But that is what it said.

"Faulty hologram?" Fives muttered. He flicked the switch (internally) that would turn the holo off before it could embarrass him further. The hologram did not disappear. It turned to him and said, "Fives, I have an astonishing tale to tell you."

And then Quill noticed the crowd at the bottom of the marble steps, and he saw that even the queen of Nunneras was kneeling to him, chanting hosannas and hallelujahs.

Quill turned and viewed the crypt. He read the placard. He remembered Fives' scheme. Then, trying not to smile too broadly, he turned to the crowd and spoke, "It is written: 'one from the stars will come, and he will be rebuked. He shall find death, and he will return from death, bringing his Word of a new age and a new Way.'"

A hushed silence was followed by a series of hymns. As everyone sang a different hymn, the result was dissonant clamor. After covering his ears for a few moments, Quill raised his hands for silence. In the ensuing quiet, he spoke to the assemblage, "I have returned from Heaven with word of a new order of things." He cleared his throat and continued, in ringing tones, "First of all...."

"Best we start off with only a few reforms, sir," Fives whispered.

"Yes, you're quite right," Quill murmured aside to Fives. He shouted: "Firstly, there will be no more severing of lips: the young will retain their lips that they may more easily speak the holy word. Second, visitors from other worlds will be admitted to Nunneras and allowed to roam freely. They shall be admitted only if they arrive under the auspices of the Galactic Tourist Agency. They shall be given hospitality and comfortable lodgings at a rea-

sonable price. And clean towels and sterile cups. All this, that they may see the example of Nunneras and go away with a change troubling their hearts ... so that, on their respective worlds, they will come to a realization of the glory of Nunneranism, as I did. And think of the cash flow they'll bring in—"

"Sir..." whispered Fives warningly.

"Sorry," said Quill, aside. "Habit." Louder, he said, "And, finally, the princess Enrilla and I will travel, alone, to other worlds of the galaxy as spiritual envoys of Nunneras, bringing the Good Word of Holy Redemption." He caught Enrilla's eye, expecting to see her blush. She winked.

The skies of Terra were cobalt blue that sunny morning. Even the squawks of poultry seemed jolly to Quill. Or nearly.

Fives and Quill paused outside Commissioner Feldspar's home. The commissioner's visage, three meters high, was reproduced on the facade of his synthawood house, between two bay windows. It flickered through a series of expressions. All the houses up and down the street were fronted with the typical facial facades, the most common day-to-day expressions of their owners. It was that sort of street.

Fives turned to Quill and remarked, "But surely, Master Quill, the people of the Other Earth will in time flood into our Earth through their death portals, to escape the overcrowding of their own world...."

"Not so. Most of them have been raised with their heads in their boxes. They *believe* the world they see on the small TV screens.... Only those in power would have come here, if their plot had worked. Their government is utterly autocratic.... I barely escaped myself. It was Ilana, of course, who made my escape possible. She consented to show me the Calculated Death Windows because she loved me. She must have secretly known I'd try to escape through them. And she voluntarily indicated the window leading — through Death — to Nunneras. She could not bear to see the magnificent Tripstickler sword blunted. I pretended to be docile, as if succumbing to brainwashing, until I was given a tour of the building containing the Windows."

"It must have taken great courage, Master Quill, to leap head-first through that window — to your death," said Fives, buttering up his employer.

"I must admit," said Quill with the airy wave of a Great Man Acknowledging His Humbleness, "that I leapt through the window through desperation as much as courage. My grasp on reality is tenuous enough as it is, without my giving it into someone else's control.... It hurt, when I hit the street. But only for a moment. And then I was standing outside my own crypt, in Nunneras."

"Quill, my boy!" cried Commis-

sioner Feldspar joyously, coming to the door to greet them. "Come in! I want you to know I have decided to permit you to remain in the Galactic Tourist Agency after all. And, at *no* significant cut in pay.... Your opening up Nunneras for us — after nearly blundering it — was a masterful stroke."

Quill hesitated on the front step. "I'm not sure I want to come back to work for the agency," he said quietly, examining his immaculately manicured fingernails. "Not without a substantial raise and a promotion."

"What! You weak-minded ingrate! You can stuff your—"

"Or else I'll have to tell the Nunnerans that it might be dangerous after all to permit Satanic tourists on their pristine turf...."

Feldspar fell silent. He scowled. His image, on the facade of the house above him, sccowled too. "Very well. You may have anything you like. A promotion. A raise. Anything."

"Anything?" Quill looked at the duck, which peered nervously out from between its owner's legs.

"Anything," said Feldspar.

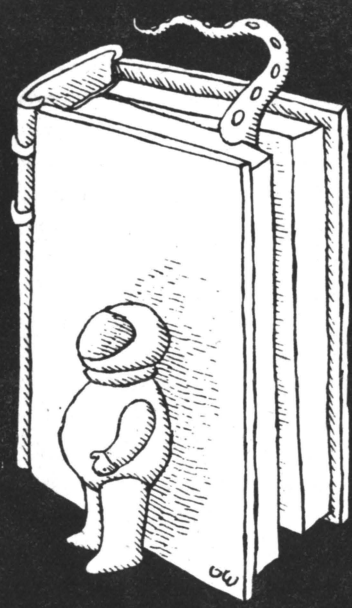
"I want that duck," Quill said.

"My — my duck?" Feldspar trembled. Then, resignedly, he said, "Very well."

"And," Quill added, grasping the duck firmly about the neck before it could speak, "I want a word with your chef."

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

God Emperor of Dune, Frank Herbert, Putnam, $12.95

Down to a Sunless Sea, David Graham, Simon & Schuster, $13.95

Wandor's Flight, Roland Green, Avon, $2.75

Voyagers, Ben Bova, Doubleday, $14.95

Before we begin, this seems an appropriate time to state the ground rules under which I do my reviews and critical essays. Here are those underlying assumptions:

Criticism is not subject to the democratic process.

I thank you for your kind attention, and now let's get on with it.

The field owes a debt of gratitude to Frank Herbert not only because he has produced some good work over the years but because he is our outstanding example of the writer who has successfully moved straightline, magazine-born commercial science fiction into the bestseller category several times. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., has scored outstanding sales successes with work that was undeniably speculative fiction, but he has done so by denying the thing that Hugo Gernsback called, successively, "scientific fiction," "scientifiction," and, finally, "science fiction." Ray Bradbury has built a solid international reputation among non-SF readers, but again through the process which divorces his work from science fiction. Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger*

in a Strange Land, and its successors, reach their hundreds of thousands of readers by means which are in part an explicit denial of Heinlein's own past work. Herbert, and for all practical purposes Herbert alone, has broken down the old "mainstream" saw that "If it's science fiction it can't be good, and if it's good it can't be science fiction."

I grant you that sheer number of readers says nothing about a book's literary merits or even about its success as an exercise in craftsmanship. I not only grant it, I affirm it — in somewhat different words — in Paragraph Two, above. In that sense, popularity says nothing about "good." But massive popularity for the *Dune* series throws the entire "mainstream" critical establishment on the defensive, because it judges so many of its "own" books on the same criterion. Segregating Herbert away from the "important" writers becomes a much more complex matter for the watchers and warders of the Establishment, and many of them are not up to much beyond the reiteration of simple prejudices. In a way, it's even particularly good for SF that Herbert is not marked by the personal idiosyncrasies seen in Vonnegut's approach, or Bradbury's, or the later Heinlein's. He is a good wordsmith, period, except for the times when something slips and he is a boring wordsmith. The opening he has created is not uniquely Herbert-shaped; it is SF-shaped, and other SF writers can, God and smarts willing, hope to also pass through it without having to contort their work very much.

We may, in other words, be attaining a day when for some reason there are suddenly not tens of thousands but possibly millions of book-readers who are receptive to and appreciative of the unique qualities of straightline science fiction. This condition has never existed previously.

As for *God Emperor of Dune* itself, I find it thoroughly representative of Herbert's boring mode; talky, mired in plodding retrospective references to events in the *Dune* trilogy, and unredeemed by the tinsel grandiosity of Herbert's assumption that any promise of immortality and unchecked expansion for the human race will bring a thrill of satisfaction to the reader. There are ways to make that promise seem like the least desirable fate for the Universe, and Herbert has found them here.

The book does not, strictly speaking, transform the trilogy into a tetralogy. Duncan Idaho — interminable Duncan Idaho — carries over, but the setting is a totally transformed Arrakis 3500 years in the trilogy's future, and the protagonist is Leto Atreides, the barely human worm. Furthermore, his story is told in archeographic form, based on records found by the human culture of *his* exceedingly remote future, so that the connection even with *Children of Dune* is greatly rarefied.

Nor is Leto really what you'd call your identifiable-with character.

Throughout his career, Herbert has demonstrated this puzzling ability to write badly despite being a good writer. *Under Pressure — The Dragon in The Sea* — his greatly impressive maiden novel, contained some segments so slow and so talky that they are best passed-over with the thought that they are vestiges of an understandable uncertainty in pacing. But many of his later works are almost entirely overblown novelettes stretched out by discourses and declamations that are either irrelevant or shallow, or both.

Herbert has never learned pacing, and I think this is because he has never learned to edit himself. Every writer has digressions in mind as the narrative proceeds; the name of the on-stage character's mother- in-law, the color of the rug in the next room, the basic philosophical reason why he lives in a split-level tract home instead of an urban condominium, the political machinations that result in zoning laws with peculiar loopholes, the underlying reasons why we have cities, politicians, and mothers-in-law. Herbert seems to often find these sidebar ruminations worthy of inclusion in the manuscript.

They are of course useful in filling out a story to epic length, as are flashbacks and other forms of reference to material in earlier books. But in the particular case of *God Emperor*, they abound to a degree which I believe makes the book impenetrable to new readers of the series. If you wish to read it — more realistically, considering that it's been out since May 6, if you have a copy but couldn't get into it, or if you're waiting for the paperback — the course I suggest to you is that you get the three earlier *Dune* books and start on Page One.

What will happen, if your tastes are much like mine, is that you will enjoy the first book, *Dune*, very much until you get to where Paul Atreides reacts with unseemly casualness to the killing of his infant child.

The thought will cross your mind that you are reading a book by someone who is so caught up with the sweep of his overall scheme that he occasionally takes his eye off his characters, as distinct from his characters as pegs moving from station to station in a complex game. After that, you will enjoy the book a little less, although still responding pleasurably to many individual scenes, particularly the climactic ones. But *Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune* will expand on this flaw of dealing with a Messianic figure who is in fact, and less and less subtly, repellent. You will then arrive at Leto Atreides in the proper frame of mind to empathize with a worm.

Presuming you arrive at all, as I would not have except that I have a duty toward you. However, we do owe Herbert that debt — always assuming that it's the vast sweep of his canvas, and not the foggery of the pet-

ty details which has so engaged that vast readership.

Outsiders, of course, are constantly using SF signatures to construct popular thrillers. I have here, for instance, David Graham's *Down to a Sunless Sea*, which was due for release on May 16 — and thus will be out in paper any time now — and I wonder how it made out in the market. Not that it could have been a failure, because assuredly the subsidiary rights had all been exploited and the money had all changed hands before this book ever saw typesetting. But I will be curious to look back as I read these words in my copy of F&SF and see if I can recall whether this confection took the general public by storm.

Written by Englishman David Graham, it is a peculiar pastich of *On the Beach*, *Airport*, and all those books about a New York City in the days of killer smog and starvation. With a sure grasp for the cliches of every cheap novel ever written about America in urban trouble, Graham gets his British airline captain involved with a series of characters and situations that explain why Darkies were born and the fatalistic strength of good old Anglosaxon pioneer stock, melds in some hot-to-trot stewardesses, and, with an eyebrow-raising smugness, gets in a series of cheap shots at the pathetic case in which America has found itself. His hero pilots the last refugee flight out of the U.S., in his super-747, only to find enroute to England that World War III has been set off and the entire planet is becoming unlivable overnight.

Some rather effective scenes follow in which the plane — and other planes linked to it by fading, increasingly hopeless radio contact as their fuel runs out and the few remaining landing sites become overcrowded or closed by crashes — searches for a place to set down. At the last minute, of course, it finds one; the U.S. airbase in the Azores, which was hit only by a neutron bomb, and not blast. There, the several hundred passengers and crew have a day or two before the big wave of airborne death begins to fall on them. And in that day or two, they have to cobble-up some way of reaching the U.S. base in Antarctica, which is the only place on Earth the fallout will not reach.

Well, they make it. So does a Soviet transport loaded with women and children, and piloted by a female who, despite being quite recently widowed, slips into the airline captain's bed with passionate Slavic alacrity, not at all ruffling the feathers of the Earthmotherly stewardess who had been his main squeeze up to that point. Then the Earth tips so that Antarctica takes up a position on the Equator, and the peasant women can go ahead and plant their beets and potatoes and celebrate the one-ness of humankind and the cleansing, redeeming soil. Graham is a former fighter pilot. He has obviously never been a farmer, much less a geo-

physicist or even a science researcher. But I would have expected him to know something about meteorology. Nevertheless, perhaps it's time we started paying more attention to this kind of book, because for the first time we have some hope of competing with it, and, perhaps, even driving it out of serious contention.

Roland Green's Wandor series will probably never attract many readers outside the SF community, which is not to say that there isn't plenty of readership within it. *Wandor's Flight*, the fourth in the series, does offer some engagement for C.S. Forester fans, in that it is full of ship-handling details and politicomilitary strategy, but basically it continues the mood and tone of the earlier volumes, which were pure fantasy-adventure.

Green is someone with whom you may not be familiar, since he has rarely if ever published in magazines or at short lengths. You will not recognize his byline on most of his many books, either, since he has devoted years to the pseudonymous production of strong-thewed hero novels promulgated by Lyle Kenyon Engle's factory. But he is — my friend is — almost a cliche in the sole respect that he is contemplative, studious, quite formally educated in the Humanities, given to polysyllabic articulations full, furthermore, of the sort of dependent clause one finds — usually — only on the printed page, and looks as little like Conan the Conqueror as Leigh Brackett did like one of her bare-abdomened priestesses. In putting his own name to the Wandor series, Green is proclaiming a labor more of love than of pecuniary ambition, although the royalty checks doubtless come welcome in maintaining the apartment crammed with densely-set books of reference and exposition on every subject under the Sun.

In the contention between the lands of Chonga and Benzos, Bertan Wandor of the Order of Duellists and his consort, Gwynna, continue to work out their destinies, beset by sorcery, by their own ability to sense and perhaps manipulate Fate, and by the schemes of various temporal rulers. Green's visualization is so detailed that Page Cuddy of Avon quite sapiently suggested the additon of a chronology, a precis of preceding events, and a glossary. These are charming creations in themselves, in addition to being extremely helpful for the newcomer to the series, which is heavily populated by individuals with names nowhere near as readily felicitous as Page Cuddy of Avon, though some of them are as noble.

The thing about the Wandor books — and this one in particular — is that they describe a complete world, with a complete history, rather suitable for wargaming come to think of it, and there is a sense that Green contemplates it with a creator's meticulous fondness. They are not everyone's cup of tea, even within the SF community,

because a fair number of SF readers are just as happy with the fantasy equivalent of the Timeless West, in which the cast performs its evolutions in a vacuum relieved by scene-paintings of distant archetypical castles, the armor is costumes and not a mechanism, and there are no horse-apples anywhere. Wandor's world would benefit, as well, if Green were not bending over backwards to prevent its being mistaken for the scene of hurry-up plotting. There are times when one cries out: "Get *on* with it, man!" But he loves it, you see — or so the result proclaims, whereas in *God Emperor* there is the sense that Herbert loves the thing that produces the results, a less direct affection.

On August 28, if it kept to its schedules, Doubleday allowed the publication of Ben Bova's *Voyagers*, a novel not part of its SF category fiction list and clearly intended by the author to be directly competitive with books like *Down to a Sunless Sea* and the novels of Martin Caidin. I very strongly recommend it to you, because it is a more than satisfactory reading experience. With bittersweet foreknowledge, I tell you it's almost certainly available right now at your remainder bookstore for a fraction of the announced price; otherwise, Bantam will bring out the paperback in 1982.

There is every expectation at this writing (in June) that Doubleday will have done little or nothing to promote it, and that it will slip into limbo at least until the paperback begins appearing in what may also be desultory distribution. Bantam, which could sell a quarter million copies of pages offset from the Des Moines telephone book if it got its sales force excited, or could bury it in the Altoona bus terminal if it didn't, is liable to regard *Voyagers* as a failed attempt at a bestseller ... that is, something to be distributed just well enough to salvage its reprint-rights payment to Doubleday.

I don't want to present this to you as a tragedy. The heavens will not fall if you never read this book, and worse injustices are perpetrated by publishing idiosyncrasies every week. But it is a fate neither this book nor its author's energies and craftsmanship deserve, it is ridiculous in terms of what Doubleday and Bantam could have realized from it — with, of course, a share to Bova — and, from your point of view, it's unlikely that while reading this book you will be disturbed by any thought that you would rather be reading some other book. In certain of its sequences, you will even resent the need to go to the bathroom or get some sleep. It's a page-turner.

Bova should need no introduction, being the author of any number of books of SF and science fact, former editor of *Analog* and present executive editor of *Omni*, and a man with an excellent track record as a writer of clean, swift prose with clear and desirable objectives. *Voyagers* combines the

realism of near-future technological stories and international-intrigue novels with the almost uniquely science-fictional sense of the brooding majesty of the Universe. It is, in other words, an intelligent practitioner's deliberate attempt to translate science fiction into the bestseller marketplace; not a sell-out, a sell-in. And that may account for its problems as an item of merchandise.

Not to put too fine a point on it, what you see in the book is two-thirds of the original manuscript, cut to that semblance by the fiat of one Doubleday general fiction editor and preserved in that semblance by his successor, who apparently treated it with the thoughtfulness and professionalism persons often display when something is, from their viewpoint, Not Invented Here. It was the previous editor's book — whatever he had made of it — and the objective now was to get it off the desk as cursorily as possible.

It's not my main point that the book did suffer detectably from the first editor's treatment (to say nothing of what it might have been, which, for all I know, might have aggregated to something *less* satisfactory). Bova postulates a situation in which an alien spacecraft enters the Solar System, eventually approaches Earth just closely enough to be reached if a joint U.S./U.S.S.R. effort is made at crash priority, and then is reached at the very limit of feasibility by one astronaut who has very little time in which to study it and its enigmatic contents. The bulk of the wordage is procedural; on this simple skeleton, Bova erects subplot after verisimilitudinous subplot and scene in which we get a very convincing sense of what this would mean to the U.S. space establishment and government, within big-time research academe, within the Kremlin, and within the Vatican as well as in the Bible Belt. It is essentially a scenario in response to the simple question What would happen to our society if we, in our time, were faced with incontrovertible proof there were other civilized races out there somewhere?

No more than that. But that's quite a bit. And Bova — who has not always been my favorite SF writer, and whom I never think of when I prepare my lists of The Top Twenty* — has produced some excellent, compelling prose to carry it onward. It's the very best fiction writing I've ever seen from him. More important, it is a full grade beyond the necessary or usual in this kind of book.

There are *some* cardboard characters among the principal cast, and I think they would still have been there if all the sub-plots had been preserved, since the she-loves-me, she-loves-me-not exchanges between the hero and the heroine are stereotyped *per se*. But

* *Unless it were a list of the Top Twenty most influential and energetic science and science-fiction popularizers of our day. There, he would make the Top Five, possibly not last.*

this is not true of all the characters, particularly the very well-drawn Russians, and most particularly the ponderous KGB functionary.

Bova has done a bang-up job on that aspect of his book, and a very good job on most of the others. For readers, there are only slight glitches — missing bridges; characters sometimes depart to perform some crucial task in which they might fail, but succeed — or fail — offstage. A fair number of recent SF novels have been accepted and rewarded as major works while containing exactly similar discontinuities, whether for the same reason is not important here. What is important is they obviously don't constitute major deterrences to pleasure.

So this is a good book. But there is also a lesson in the fact that — unless something drastically positive and vanishingly extraordinary happens to Doubleday's attitude between June and August — it will be a book that stands purely on its own merits.

That, as any student of today's publishing scene can tell you, is the same as abandoning an infant on a hillside. Even a bookseller who somehow acquires a personal liking for it cannot realistically afford to promulgate it to his clientele; seller and clientele alike are being overwhelmed with promotional wordage and materials shrewdly aimed at pushing the many competing titles in the market at the same moment. The arrow of success is fleeting, and in the case of August books was launched last winter; too much of publishing's machinery is already entrained in the process of dispublishing this book.

And that, of course, is also a feature of the arena whose gates Frank Herbert has opened to us, and not our piety nor Bova's wit can change it. Rule Two: There are no other rules; there are happenstances.

BOOKS RECEIVED

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, April 1965, Edited by Edward L. Ferman and Martin H. Greenberg, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL. A hardcover facsimile reprint of the April 1965 issue, with introduction by Ferman, and memoirs by Isaac Asimov, Poul Anderson, Ted Thomas and other writers included in the issue.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW INDEX, 1974-1979, Edited by H.W. Hall, Gale Research Co., Detroit, Mich. $78.00. Indexes all sf and related books reviewed in nearly 250 general and specialized periodicals.

Nancy Kress's First F&SF contribution is a first-rate story about a young man who leaves the security of academe to become, of all things, an SF writer. Mrs. Kress teaches in the English Department of the State University of New York and has had stories in Omni, Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine *and* Universe 11. *Her first novel, PRINCE OF MORNING BELLS, will soon be published by Pocket Books.*

Casey's Empire

BY

NANCY KRESS

This is the story of Jerry Casey, who lost a galactic empire. Oho, you sneer to yourself — one of *those*. You know, of course, from your vast reading, what a trivial and hackneyed idea a galactic empire is — even now. You know, of course, from your vast reading, about the convoluted, melodramatic machinations by which a hero loses an empire, and what that feels like. Go suck an egg; you wouldn't know a galactic empire if you tripped over it, which Casey did. Tripped over it and lost it. You think you know how that feels? You don't know. Unless it has happened to you, you don't know. You can't ever know.

He was born in the 1950's in Montana, but he didn't let it bother him. To his child's eyes, the big, lonely, empty plains were within the sound of the sea, within a hard day's climb of the Himalayas, within touch of the hibiscus-smelling rain forest. He walked on desert sands or ancient glaciers or the bottom of the Mariana Trench. At night the wide sky was impossibly full of stars, and he named them all and walked on their spangle-colored planets. Part of it, of course, was his reading, which he did so constantly that he failed the fifth grade. But not all of it. There was something else, something extra, something his own. His parents were puzzled but tolerant. They bought a new car every three years, new drapes every five, and saved up for yearly vacations in Las Vegas. Older people — he was a late, only child. Kind, decent, stupid people. Casey loved them.

His high school years were no more hellish than anyone else's; his college years were an anonymous marathon of beer blasts, rock concerts, and overdue

term papers; his decision to enter graduate school was complicated by his advisor's doubt that any graduate school would enter him. But enrollment was falling, programs were being cut if too few live bodies registered for thesis seminar, and Casey found himself a teaching fellow in a small undistinguished college that was part of a large undistinguished state university system in the Northeast. He also found himself scorned. Politely, judiciously, even indulgently — he was in the Humanities, and indulgence was encouraged — but scorned is scorned.

"What's your area?" asked Paul Rizzo, the stocky, bearded teaching fellow with whom Casey shared an office. Rizzo was wearing a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and Frye boots. All the male teaching fellows, Casey had noticed, wore plaid flannel shirts, jeans, and Frye boots. So did some of the females. Casey wore a sports jacket.

"Area?"

"For your thesis."

"I'm doing the option — the creative-writing thesis. A novel."

"A *novel?*"

"Yeah, you know," Casey said, "a fiction narrative over 40,000 words. You've heard of them."

Rizzo's eyes narrowed. "Have you started this, uh, novel?"

"Yes."

Rizzo seemed surprised. He stopped in the middle of changing his plaid flannel shirt for a football jersey, arms suspended in midair. Twice a week he scrimmaged to keep in shape, playing on a team limited to grad students and captained by a third-year fellow in the biology department who had his own grant from the federal government.

"What's it about?"

Casey smiled. "In twenty-five words or less?"

"All right, then, what's it like? Who would you say your writing was closest to, if you had to name an influence, a mentor? Barth? Hemingway? Dickens? Faulkner?"

Casey took a deep breath. "Burroughs."

"*Naked Lunch?*"

"No, not William."

"Then who"—"

"Edgar."

"*Edgar* Burroughs? You write..."

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Rizzo finished sliding into his football jersey and picked up his helmet, rubbing a finger over a jagged nick. Then he smiled. Politely, judiciously.

"Well, chacun à sa gout, right?"

"*Son* gout," Casey said.

"My thesis is on Keats. The psychosexual relation of the "Hyperion" fragment to his later work. You probably don't like Keats, though?"

"Why not?"

"If you write that ... do you like Keats?"

Casey picked up Rizzo's football shoe and fingered the cleats. He tried each one in turn, pressing lightly with the end of his index finger. They were all dull. Rizzo waited. Indulgently.

"Well, I'll tell you, Paul. I really think Keats is some kind of poet. Not too commercial, you know, but a strong sensory receiver, quick on the end line. Some kind of poet. But, overall, I guess I have to go with Edgar Guest. Enjambment-wise, that is."

Rizzo turned maroon. Casey smiled. Politely, judiciously, indulgently.

"Who you got for frosh comp?"

"Some flake in a striped sports jacket. Young. He talked about *semicolons.*"

"Must be the new guy. Casey."

Casey, the new guy, ducked behind the gray bulk of the candy-and-pastries vending machine. The styrofoam cup he was carrying sloshed coffee onto his striped sports jacket. The student on the other side of the vendor kicked it.

"Took my quarter again!"

"Here, have half my Babe Ruth."

"Eff-ing machine. Any frat files on his assignments?"

"Not yet. He's *new.*"

"Just my luck."

"It'll be all right. The new ones don't like to flunk anybody. Just go to class. The new ones take attendance."

"He wants us to write a paper for Friday."

"Get Sue to do it. She's an English major."

"Yeah. Jesus — semicolons!"

"Yeah."

He got used to teaching freshmen. He made truce with Rizzo. What he couldn't get used to or make truce with, what led him to discover why a university was a bad place to write, was the faculty.

His professors spoke blithely of Shakespeare's "minor plays," Shaw's "failed efforts," Dickens' "unsuccessful pieces." Stories that Casey, stretched out on a flat rock under the blank Montana sky, had thrilled to and wondered at and anguished over, were assigned grades like so many frosh comp papers. B+ to Somerset Maugham and Jane Austen. B− to C.S. Lewis and *Timon of Athens.* His own half-finished stories, Casey figured, the stories sweated and bled and wept over in the $83-a-month hole above a barber shop, were about a H−. On a good day.

His thesis advisor was a Dreiser man. If you are a Dreiser man, Casey learned, if you champion Dreiser and the American realists for 25 years (including six articles in *PMLA*), if you dissect and evaluate and explore Dreiser, you can *be* Dreiser. You know what he wrote in the margins of his books, how he wore his hair and who cut it. You have his/your position in *belles-lettres* to defend, and you fight for it ferociously. When a prestigious Eastern university has a sudden unfortunate death among its existing faculty and so needs to acquire another American realist, you throw your hat into the academic ring and play politics with dead candidates. You win, and jolly well you should. Dreiser is a defi-

nite A. And then so, of course, are you.

Casey walked. He walked on village streets at noon, over snowy athletic fields before dawn, in night woods where one clumsy step could break his unwary neck. While he walked, he agonized. He agonized because he was not Tolstoy or Shakespeare or even Maugham. He agonized because he was honest enough to know that he never would be Tolstoy or Shakespeare or Maugham, complimented himself on being "at least" that honest with himself, and agonized that his self-compliments showed a lack of artistic passion. When he wasn't walking and agonizing, he wrote. It was all H—. When he wasn't writing, he read Dreiser. It was a definite A.

"But I had my advisor's approval for the thesis before I began!" Casey said. He tried to sound indignant rather than desperate, and knew he failed. "Both Dr. Jensen and Dr. Schorer signed the approval form!"

"I know that," said Dr. Stine, Chairman of the Graduate Committee. He sat behind his book-cluttered desk in his book-lined office and looked distressed. Beyond the open window three students, exhilarated by the spring, were tossing a blue frisbee; occasionally it hit the building with a soft clunk muffled by budding ivy.

"They both knew my novel was going to be s-"

"I know that, too, Mr. Casey." The chairman's distress was genuine. Casey didn't care. "We are not narrow in our academic outlook, Mr. Casey. There is room for many different types of writing in our creative thesis option. The graduate committee is perfectly aware that a lot of exciting research is being carried out right now in your field and that there is much literary merit in selected examples of sci-fi."

Casey winced. Dr. Stine didn't notice. The frisbee hit the wall.

"We're also aware that Ph.D.'s are being granted by very prestigious universities for scholarly work in sci-fi. But both the writing and the research ends that are worthy of serious attention concern the *best* sci-fi, the work concerned with social insight and human verities. Hawthorne's 'truth of the human heart,' you know,' the chairman said, and smiled, obviously pleased with this reference. The frisbee hit the wall.

"*Your* novel, on the other hand, is just — just *adventure*. Escapist improbabilities. You must see — 'galactic empire'!"

"It's a realistic interpretation of a possible technological —"

"Precisely. *Technological*, not humane. You don't deal with psychological or social themes at all. When your protagonist meets those aliens in the blue UFO — *blue* — I'm sorry, Mr. Casey. It's not that your novel is badly written. In fact, it shows some commercial promise; it's colorful and fast-

paced. But it doesn't measure up to the standards of serious fiction. And serious literature is what a thesis-novel acceptable to the English department must at least *try* to be."

"It could very well happen just the way I —"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Casey. I wish you would believe that."

Casey did believe it. He uttered a short expletive that he hoped made the chairman even sorrier, and left the book-lined office just as the frisbee missed the wall altogether and sailed through the window, a miniature blue UFO.

He resigned from the university, regretted it as pretentiously, self-indulgent, and stayed resigned. To fill his time, he wrote, waited on tables at a local pizzeria, brooded over his rejection slips, and walked. The walking, he figured, was the best thing he did. He could walk for hours, could walk all night. After a while he no longer needed to look down at his own feet in even the darkest, most unfamiliar woods; his feet developed such sure sensing of the dead twigs and leaf-covered rabbit holes that he never stumbled. He could walk looking upward at the stars which, in some way, he couldn't say just exactly how, had betrayed him. He could walk on desert sands, on ancient glaciers, on the bottom of the Mariana Trench. His walking was a definite A.

* * *

"Hey, Casey!"

"Hello, Rizzo. What'll you have?"

"What do you want, Darlene?"

"Oh, I don't know — pepperoni, for sure. Mushrooms, green pepper, onions. And anchovies, if they're fresh. Are the anchovies fresh?"

"Are the anchovies fresh?" Rizzo asked Casey.

"No," Casey said.

"Well, then, no anchovies. OK, Darl?"

"Are they *good* frozen anchovies?" Rizzo asked Casey.

"No," Casey said.

"So what are you doing now?" Rizzo said, and added hastily, without glancing around the pizzeria, "What are you going to do? I mean your, uh, plans?"

"Bring you a pizza without anchovies," Casey said, saw that he was being a bastard again, and tried harder. "Guess what, Rizzo? I sold one."

Rizzo wrinkled his beefy forehead. "One what?"

"One *story*. I sold one."

"You did? Hey, that's great! Is it ... is it one of those —"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"Well, that's still great! Do you mind if I ask you what you got for it? No, never mind. None of my business."

"It wasn't much."

"I hear that market pays less. Comparatively."

"Generally, yes. There are exceptions."

"Of course — there always are.

Speaking of exceptions, do you mind if *I* brag a little? I got a job. A real, tenure-track, full-time job. Starting as *assistant professor.*"

"Congratulations. Where is it?"

"Lunell College. It's a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. I really lucked out, you know what the market is, nobody wants humanities people. Only technology-gadget guys, computer specialists and all. But this is a bona fide good deal. Guess what the salary is."

"I couldn't."

"Go ahead, guess."

"I *couldn't.*"

Rizzo told him. Casey smiled and underlined "no anchovies" on his order pad, thick and black. Twice. The pencil broke.

"I really did luck out," Rizzo said. "They just happened to need a Keats man."

He had not forgotten his childhood nomenclature for the stars, but now he learned everyone else's. This was easy because there seemed to be fewer stars than there had been in Montana. He wrote out a list of the more mellifluous ones, set the list to the melody of a sixteenth-century English madrigal, and chanted it while he walked:

Regulus Fomalhaut Betelguese
Ri - i - gel,
Arcturus Polaris Cano - o - pus
Al - TAIR.

The chant stayed in his head while he tried to write about galactic empires and interstellar battles; since he couldn't get the tune out, he learned to ignore it. After a while he found it rather soothing and came to depend upon it while he sweated and thrashed and fought, motionless at his Salvation Army desk.

The actual presence of real stars was less soothing. Nightly he glared upwards, weather permitting, with real anger, while summer dew soaked his sneakers and a crick developed at the back of his neck. He didn't try to understand his anger; it was more satisfying to revel in it. They had let him down, Regulus Fomalhaut Betelguese Ri-i-gel. They had all let him down. They had not delivered, somehow, what had been promised, promised to the Montana kids playing on the big flat rock in the middle of prosperous insignificance: Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine and Jerry Casey, playing UFO and Sirian Invaders and Would-You-Go? They had deceived. They were not what he thought them. They had refused to let him go, as they had let Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine go, but they had also refused to satisfy him. They were heartless, they were cold, they were shallow, and he himself was probably crazy to stand here thinking of them as anything but ongoing nuclear fusions. "Many thynges doth infect the ayre, as the influence of sondry sterres," he quoted aloud, enormously pleased to have remembered the quote from Renaissance Lit. He only quoted

aloud when in deserted areas, however; his angry craziness demanded privacy to be fully wallowed in. It was a lover's quarrel.

Jerry! Happy birthday, dear!"

"Thanks, mom."

"So how does it feel to be twenty-six, son?"

"Oh, I don't know, dad. Not too different from twenty-five."

"Your presents are in the mail, dear. I'm sorry they didn't get East by your birthday, but I just couldn't get to town to the post office; the car was acting up, and your father couldn't figure out if it was the starter or that little black thing that goes from the —"

"Now, Mary, we don't need to tell him all that long distance."

"Guess not. How's everything going, dear?"

"Fine, just fine."

"Did you sell any more —"

"No. No, I haven't. It takes time, you know, mom."

Fourteen hundred miles away, his father cleared his throat. Jerry held the receiver a little away from his ear and closed his eyes, waiting.

"Speaking of selling, son, I happened to talk to John Nielsen yesterday, and he still needs someone to help him and Carl at the Grain & Feed. Now I'm not pressuring you, you know that. Whatever you want to do is fine with your mother and me. That's what we've always said, and we mean it. But I just promised John I'd pass along the information to you, so I am."

"Okay," Casey said. "The information is passed." He could see his father holding the phone — the upstairs extension, it would be — lightly in his big hand, still wearing his stetson with his boots and plaid flannel shirt.

"Just so's you know, son."

"I know," Casey said. There was a pause.

"Are you still seeing that girl, dear, that you wrote us about? The kindergarten teacher? Kara Phillips?"

"Yes. No. A little."

"I have an idea! Why don't you bring her with you when you come home for Christmas? You know, we'd just love to have her!"

"Now, Mary, don't push," Casey's father said.

"I wasn't *pushing*, Calvin Casey! All I said was that we'd love to have Jerry's friend stay with us over Christmas, if he'd like to bring her. She could have the spare room, it was just freshly papered, it'd be no trouble at all."

"Thanks, mom. Maybe I'll ask her."

"Of course, it's up to *you*. Write us when your presents arrive, so I know they fit, and tell us if Kara is coming for Christmas."

"Assistant manager," his father said. "Did I mention that it's assistant manager?"

"Well, bye, dear. Happy birthday!"

"Good starting salary, son."

"Love you," Casey's mother said.

"Love you, too," Casey said, and hung up the receiver carefully, with no sound.

He quit the pizzeria. One night in October he had waited on the Chairman of the Graduate Committee, Dr. Stine. The man had been so tactful, so diplomatic in chatting with Casey without once mentioning Casey's failed novel-thesis, Casey's inexpert self-haircut ($4.70 at the barber, and that without sideburns), Casey's tomato-and-mozzarella smeared apron, that Casey had been unable to stand it. He smiled at the chairman, said yes, fall was beautiful in this part of the country, said yes, it was interesting that the papers always reported an increase in UFO sightings in the fall, said no, he didn't think there was anything in it. Then he went into the kitchen and stuffed his apron into the pizza oven, where it turned the exact color of flabby frozen anchovies.

He found a job as part-time grounds man for an old, beautiful, tree-shaded cemetery. He wrote all morning and raked leaves all afternoon, avoiding funerals in progress. The metal rake prongs caught repeatedly at the bases of tombstones and then twanged back, a sound as monotonous and hypnotic as a pendulum. Sometimes he returned late at night and walked through the cemetery. The darkness was rich and velvety; it was the quick flashes of headlights beyond the iron gates that seemed like the ghosts. He read the oldest of the tombstones with a penlight, stooping to trace the letters with his finger when age had made them illegible:

ELIZABETH ANN CARMODY

1851-1862

Eleven years old, he thought. At eleven years old he had been playing Would You Go? on the big flat rock on the plains. Eleven years old.

JAMES ALLEN ROBERTS

1789-1812

DULCE ET DECORUM EST PRO PATRIA MORI

Ha, snorted Casey, child of draft-card burnings and ping-pong detente.

CECILIA HARDWICK SMITH

1848-1879

BEYOND THIS NARROW VALE OF EARTH
WHERE BRIGHT CELESTIAL AGES ROLL
THE COUNTLESS STARS OF HEAVEN'S REALM
GUIDE AND LIGHT THE WAND'RING SOUL

Ha again, Casey told the stars, the lover's quarrel having solidified into the cynical half-banter of an accepted marriage. *So go ahead, guide and light. Send down knowledge. Send down enlightenment. Send down a publisher. Go ahead, I'm waiting, I'm a wandering soul, as duly specified. I'm ready. H— has arisen. Go ahead.*

Clouds started to roll in from the west.

"And she said to tell you that it would be no trouble at all, you could have the spare bed in the spare room, and they'd love to have you."

Kara raised herself on one elbow in Casey's rumpled, un-spare bed. The

neon barber pole just outside Casey's window striped her breasts with revolving red and blue.

"I don't think it's fair of you to change the subject in the middle of a discussion just because you're losing.

"I was losing?"

"You know you were. And then you just drop in this invitation to your parents' house for Christmas, and that really puts me at an emotional disadvantage, Jer. It's not fighting fair."

"So report me to the Geneva Convention."

"There you go, getting nasty again, de-railing the argument just because you haven't got a valid viewpoint that won't stand up to close scrutiny."

"*I* haven't got a valid viewpoint that will stand up to close scrutiny? And what is it you've got, an airtight case?"

"I didn't say that. I said —"

"More like a braintight case."

"— that not being able to prove that a thing exists isn't the same as being able to prove that it *doesn't* exist, and —"

"Absolutely impervious to the osmosis of facts."

"— just because the Navy doesn't choose to admit that a UFO —"

"Last month it was transactional analysis."

"That was different! If you'd just have an open mind —"

"With enough holes to fit the airtight case in?"

"That's enough!" Kara shouted. She bolted upright in bed and clutched Casey's grubby sheet around her. "You're so superior, aren't you, with your clever little wisecracks about my intelligence! Just because *you've* never seen one, they don't exist, right? If Jerry Casey, great unpublished novelist, hasn't personally seen and touched and goddamn *tasted* a UFO, then there's no such thing. Of course not! No matter that hundreds of sightings have been reported, no matter that a respected witness right here in town saw a ship streaking over the woods, no matter that there doesn't — if *Jerry Casey* didn't see it, it doesn't exist, because *Jerry Casey* is the great fictional expert on spaceships and galactic empires! If Jerry Casey, with three unpublished novels and the enormous authority of his sacred pile of rejection sl—"

Casey hit her. It wasn't a hard slap, he didn't know he was going to do it until he had, and instantly he regretted it more than he had ever regretted anything else in his life. Kara put her hand to her red cheek and turned away from him, the sheet twisting itself around her small striped breasts. Tears filled her eyes but did not fall. Casey put out one hand to touch her shoulder, but he couldn't make the hand quite connect and it hung there, suspended between them, useless.

"Kara ... oh God, Kara, I'm sorry."

She didn't answer. The sheet humped up over her thin legs. Something broke in Casey, something so light and delicate he hadn't known

himself that it was there, or what he would say when it wasn't.

"Kara, listen, I'm sorry I hit you, so fucking sorry I don't know how to say it. But, Kara, you don't know, you can't know, I've wanted there to be something out there since I was a kid, wanted it more desperately than anything else in my whole fucking life. I used to stand out there on the plains and squeeze my eyes shut and *will* them to be out there, to come down to me, because I was one of them. I knew it, so they had to know it, too. I made up whole stories, epics, about how I got left here by mistake and adopted by my parents, but *they'd* come back for me eventually. It was so real I could taste it, Kara, could shiver with it down to my bones, my marrow. It was like a religion, or an insanity. And I still would like to believe, would give fucking anything to believe, but I can't. The evidence against it is just too strong. Do you know what the *odds* are that intelligent life would behave like ... so I started to convince myself that the stories were just made up. I started to *make* them up, to write them down. Kara, it's not 'superiority,' it's not wisecracks, it's ... Kara, do you see what I'm talking about? Can you understand what I'm trying to mean? Kara?"

She didn't answer. After a while he touched her. She put her head on his shoulder. He wiped her tears. She let him. He stroked her hair and apologized all over again. She said it was all right, looking pensive and thoughtful. He pulled the blanket protectively up to her chin. She lay still in his arms. He kissed her. She smiled. A few days later she called and said they should have a long talk. He never saw her again.

Paul Rizzo was getting married, and he wrote to invite Casey to the wedding. His bride was a fellow faculty member at Lunell College — an *assistant professor,* Rizzo wrote, underlining the words twice. She was also "the only child of a wealthy shoe polish entrepreneur." Casey tried to figure out how you got really wealthy from shoe polish, couldn't, and knew that this proved nothing. He wouldn't have known how to become really wealthy if the process were detailed for him in heroic couplets. For all he knew, shoe polish was a rewarding and fulfilling way to make money enough to freshly wallpaper all the spare rooms in Montana. For all he knew, shoes and the right polish were what his life had been missing all along, the yin and yang of his universe's deficiencies. For all he knew.

With his letter Rizzo had enclosed a picture of his fiancée, cut from the local newspaper which had announced their engagement. She looked pretty, if a little blurry. The invitation was embossed with blue-and-white doves swooping around a quotation from Keats.

Tramping along over the hard Montana snows on Christmas night, Casey tried to picture the wedding. There would be champagne, and sexy-coy toasts, and good food. There would be women — bridesmaids in silky dresses, Lunell professors with good minds, college-student relatives giggly and flushed with wine. The wedding was in April, over Easter recess, so the bridesmaids and professors and gigglers would have on spring dresses, light and bare. They would smell of flowery perfumes. They would dance on strappy, high-heeled sandals. They would talk to Casey on the dance floor, at the bar, on the church steps. And they would all ask him, eventually, what it was that he "did." Or tried to do. Or was supposed to be doing.

Somewhere near the barns a cow lowed. Casey tramped up to his old flat rock, knocked the snow off it, and sat down. Overhead the stars blazed. He willed himself to concentrate on the stars, to forget the depressing mechanics of attending Rizzo's wedding, the self-kept scoresheets. He just wouldn't think about it. Above him glittered Thekala, aka Aldebaran, aka The Red Terror. To the south and east shone Rigel, Sirius, Betelguese, Pollux, Procyon. The Orion Nebula, spawn ground of new stars. They used to pretend it was alive, like a queen bee. Only the southwest looked subdued, empty of all but the faint stars of Cetus. The sky there was a soft, even black, lustrous with reflected light, like....

Like shoe polish.

In January the ground froze so hard that no graves could be dug. People continued to die anyway, and their caskets were stacked, carefully labeled, in a brick vault to await a thaw. Casey was laid off. Nothing else seemed to be opening up in the cemetery line. So he took a job as a part-time janitor in a high school, nightly scrubbing anatomical impossibilities off lavatory walls with industrial-strength cleanser. He wrote.

In February it snowed 52 inches, a century's record. During the entire month the sky remained cloudy; if the stars had all simultaneously winked out, their light spent like so many weary philanderers, Casey wouldn't have known it. He caught the flu and spent six days in bed, feverishly watching the barber pole revolve against the gray snow. He wrote.

In March Dr. James Randall Stine, Chairman of the Graduate Committee and a widower for two years, announced his engagement to Miss Kara Phillips, a kindergarten teacher in the local public schools. Casey's father called to just pass on the information that Marty Hillek's father was looking around for someone with business sense to help him run the Holiday Inn. He wrote.

In April, a week before Rizzo's wedding, Casey's third attempt at a novel sold to a major publisher. It was

about a galactic empire.

He leaped through the dark April woods, the letter in his hand, the ground inches below his feet. He was Pan with scriptorial pipes, Orpheus with graphic lyre, Caesar of the literary spaceways. He was the god-child of intergalactic muses. He was the first person in the universe to publish a novel. He was the Pied Piper with hordes at his singing back, Circe with spells to drive men mad. He was drunk, but only partly on California champagne.

Running wildly through springtime smells unseen in the darkness, he held the letter before him and a little to one side, like a spear, brandishing it upward.

"See! See!" he called up between the trees, drunkenly flaunting his own theatricality. "See! See what I did about you! Look! Look!"

The stars glittered.

Casey stopped running and stood panting beneath a sugar maple, holding his side. He was Shakespeare, he was Tolstoy, he was Dreiser, he was a definite A. He could walk on spangle-colored planets forever, just as soon as his stomach lay still.

The stars glittered.

Across the sky the branches of the sugar maple slanted like bars. Gemini sliced in half, Dubhe divided from Merak. Through the bars the Milky Way looked broken, fitful, about to sever and recede even more, and it was already so far away, so high ... so high ... they were all so high.... For a dizzy second Casey put his hand on the tree trunk, searching for a foothold. But the second passed and he stood on the ground, half-trampled fern shoots under his worn boots.

The stars glittered.

OK, so the universe doesn't notice, hardly an original observation, Casey ol'boy, got to do better than that. What'd you expect — a supernova? No romantic despair; cosmic self-pity strictly forbidden in moments of drunken triumph, on pain of triviality. No brooding, no self-indulgent self-incrimination. "A man's reach should exceed...." so you've got a hell of a reach, kudos to you ol' Jer, good to have a hell of a reach. Supposed to have a hell of a reach. Reach for a star a star is born born to boogie ... oh, hell. I am not Prufrock, nor was meant to be —

Meant to be what?

Abruptly, he saw that he was not alone. Under the sugar maple, at the edge of the wide circle of branches, stood a child. A skinny, grubby boy, ten years old, gazing upward. Casey lurched forward, but the boy ignored him. Motionless except for his eyes, he was conquering distant, spangle-colored planets, and in his shining look, Casey saw, there was no longing; no one longs for what he already possesses. He was still, complete, but as Casey grabbed wildly to throttle the unbearable wholeness in the rapt face that he

knew perfectly well was not there, the champagne heaved and he threw up into the trampled fern shoots. When he could finally wipe his mouth on his shirt tail, the boy was gone.

The stars glittered.

Casey stumbled back through the woods. In one small clearing he smelled lilacs, barely budded but sweet in the dark, and he turned his head away. Somewhere he lost the path. Scratched by brambles, scuffing the decay of last year's leaves, he thrashed forward until the moon rose. It was easier, then, to walk, but the moonlit pattern of dark branches on the white letter made him squeeze his eyes shut, and it was thus that he tripped over the spaceship.

It wasn't really, of course. The ship itself was a hundred feet away, dully black in the moonlight, circled with birch branches that had been pushed aside by its landing and had snapped back. Casey, sprawled on the ground over a foot-long, log-shaped ... whatever it was, could almost feel the crack of those returning birch limbs on his back and shoulders. He reached under himself to feel the Whatever; it was hard and smooth, faintly vibrating. Unlike the boy, it did not vanish.

Unsuspected additional champagne churned in his stomach.

The ship was small; it could hardly be more than some sort of shuttle. Curved into flowing lines and embraced by budding trees, it looked weirdly beautiful in the night woods, weirdly *right*. Moonlight slid off the black surface, a deep rich black the color of loam. Leaves and ferns grew right up to where the ship rested on the forest floor. There was no burned patch, no sign that the ship had not always been there, would not always be there, a part of the ferns and birches, surrounded by the usual night rustlings and scamperings. An owl hooted.

Under Casey's belly, the Whatever began to hum.

He rolled off it and scrambled to his feet. A section of the ship slid upward, sending a shaft of blue light over the ground. Slowly, a ramp descended until it met the dead leaves, which sighed softly.

Casey closed his eyes. He was drunk, he told himself. He was drunk, he was emotionally exhausted, he was hallucinating in some bizarre, wish-fulfillment fantasy. He was insane, he was schizophrenic, he was dead. He was a grown man with a more-or-less job, aging parents, and his own copy of the ten-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*. He was afraid, but not of the ship.

When he opened his eyes, it was still there. The "door" was still open. Nothing was visible inside except the bright blue light. The log-shaped Whatever rose into the air as high as Casey's chest and floated towards the ship. Ten feet away it stopped, floated back to Casey's chest, then again toward the ship. When Casey didn't follow, it repeated the whole sequence. Casey took one step forward.

He was on the flat rock under the twilight sky. Would You Go? they asked each other, sprawled on concave stomachs. Nah, said Marty Hillek — too dangerous. Chicken! said Carl Nielsen, chicken! I'd go, said Billy DeTine, I wouldn't care, I'm not afraid, I'd go. Me too, whispered little Jerry Casey, youngest of the lot. Me too. What if you never got back? said Marty Hillek, and no one said anything.

"The probability," lectured the professor to Astronomy 101, "of intelligent life visiting earth covertly is very small. Even if we generously suppose a 50-50 chance of life developing on any planet within a 25-light-year radius of Earth, the next calculation would —"

"You don't *know*," insisted Kara Stine, née Phillips. "Nobody really *knows*."

Casey took another step forward. Wet leaves squished under his boot. The letter rustled in his hand:

> Dear Mr. Casey:
> We are happy to inform you that our editorial staff is very impressed with your book, and that we are interested in publishing it. First, however, it is necessary....

The Whatever floated back to Casey a third time. It was humming more loudly now, and in the humming Casey heard a soft urgency.

Moonlight shone on the letter, crumpled where his fist had tightened, fouled at one corner with vomited champagne.

Would You Go? asked Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine. What if you never got back? Nights on the cemetery tombs: *Regulus Fomalhaut Betelguese Ri-i-gel.* Days at his desk, struggling with stars on the head of a pin. "If Jerry Casey, great unpublished novelist, hasn't *personally* seen one...." Me too, whispered little Jerry Casey. We are happy to inform you ... "What are you doing now? I mean your, uh, plans?" Me too. Oh, me too. Happy to inform you ... "Escapist improbabilities, Mr. Casey. You must see ... 'galactic empire'!" Happy to inform you....

Casey, battlefield for two warring empires, hiccupped in anguish.

Carefully, as if he might break, he took three steps backward. Then three more.

The Whatever followed him, then reversed direction and floated towards the ship, but only once. It floated inside, and the curved section of hull lowered slowly. The ship started to rise, slowly at first, then more rapidly. For a moment the dark hull stood poised above the birches, blotting out the stars. Then it blurred and was gone. The birch branches snapped back. Something small and furry scuttled away through the leaves, startled by the sudden sharp sobbing that went on and on, the unchecked tearless sobbing of a ten-year-old boy.

You know the rest. All but Casey's name, which is not Casey. You can

read in any standard reference work about the first official UN contact with the Beta Hydrans, fifteen years ago last May. You can read the pages and pages of testimony from the Des Moines dentist and the Portuguese fisherman and the Australian housewife who visited the Beta Hydran spacecraft during their reconnaissance landings. You can read about the shifts of global power and the scientific boons and the interstellar promises of good faith and speedy return by the Beta Hydrans, who were not part of a galactic empire and who seemed bewildered by the entire concept. You can't *not* read it; it's everywhere.

You can look up Casey, too, in the reference works, and read about how he became the most famous "name" in SF before he was forty-five. You can look up his awards, his honorary this-and-thats, his movie credits, the alimony he pays both wives, his bout with alcoholism. If your mind runs that way, you can look up his biographies — written, all, by impoverished Ph.D.'s weary of Keats — which will analyze for you all the early environmental influences on Casey's writing. You can look up the academic critics, also impoverished Ph.D.'s, who have concerned themselves with Casey's novels. They find in all of them, except the first, a "lost, human yearning, a quality almost mythic in the scope of its cosmic rootlessness" (Glasser, Richard J., "Rockets and *Wanderjahr:* Another Look at SF." *PMLA*, 122 (1992), 48-76). You can look it all up, or could if you knew Casey's name. You'd recognize it, even if you don't read "that space stuff."

But what you don't know, can't look up, is the loss of Casey's galactic empire. What it was, what it meant, how it felt. You don't know. Unless it has happened to you, you don't know. You can't ever know.

Coming next month

The December issue features two exceptional stories: THE TEHAMA by Bob Leman, a true eye-popper of a horror tale by the author of "Window," and IN THE FIFTH YEAR OF THE VOYAGE by Robert Silverberg, a brand-new adventure which takes place on the Majipoor setting of LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE. The December issue is on sale November 3.

Stephen King's tales about Roland, the last gunslinger, include: "The Gunslinger" (October 1978), "The Way Station" (April 1980), "The Oracle and the Mountains" (February 1981), "The Slow Mutants" (July 1981) and, below, the fifth and last story in the first cycle. The series will be published in a limited hard-cover edition by Donald M. Grant in the Spring of 1982.

The Gunslinger and the Dark Man

BY

STEPHEN KING

SYNOPSIS: This is the fifth tale of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his quest for the Dark Tower which stands at the root of time.

Against the twilit landscape of a dying world, the gunslinger pursues the man in black, first through the town of Tull at the edge of the desert, and then into the desert itself. In the husk of a way station he comes upon a young boy named Jake from our world, and Jake, who was somehow "killed" by the man in black (the man in black pushed him under the wheels of a Cadillac at a New York City intersection), becomes the gunslinger's companion. The gunslinger has been warned by a Speaking Demon that "While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

As they pursue the man in black, Roland the gunslinger recalls his strange, marked past: his mother Gabrielle, Marten, the court sorcerer who may have somehow been transformed into the man in black he now pursues (and who, as the charismatic Good Man, pulled down the last kingdom of light), Cort, his teacher, Cuthbert, his friend, and David, the falcon, "God's gunslinger."

Roland and the boy follow the man in black into the mountains, Roland becoming surer that he may be called upon to sacrifice Jake if his progress toward the Tower is to continue.

In the foothills, the gunslinger saves Jake from the toils of a sexual vampire who has been caught for eons in a cage of Druid-stones. This creature is also an Oracle, and offers this prophecy: *Three is the number of your fate. The first is young ... he stands on the brink of robbery and murder. A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN. The second comes on wheels; her mind is iron, but her heart and her eyes are soft. The third comes in chains.*

The gunslinger asks if Jake cannot be saved from the mysterious and terrible fate of being killed a second time. *Yes,* the Oracle responds; *if you give up your quest for the Tower.* This Roland cannot do.

They climb into the mountains, and there is a brief confrontation with the dark man at the mouth of a passageway leading beneath them. The man in black mockingly promises Roland the answers he has been seeking .. but, he says, there will only be the two of us.

In spite of his own fears and Jake's growing premonition of doom, the two of them plunge into the passageway after the dark man. In that darkness the gunslinger recalls the great lighted balls and *fetes* of his childhood ... and his mother's growing enchantment with Marten, the sorcerer. They follow a river in the dark, and this leads them to an old rail-line ... and a handcar.

Flying through the dark, the gunslinger tells Jake of his coming of age, a combat-rite of manhood which he attempted early — horrifyingly early, due more than anything else to his growing realization that Marten and his mother have become lovers. He wished to challenge Marten, he tells Jake obliquely, but he could only do that as a man ... even if the combat-rite ended in his premature exile from the kingdom he had always known.

In the horrifying combat which followed, Roland bested Cort, his teacher, by using David, his falcon, as his weapon.

Jake is unimpressed by the story; *It was a game, wasn't it?* he says. *Do grown men always have to play games?*

On their sixth day/night under the mountains, they encounter the Slow Mutants, horrible, starving subhuman creatures who subsist on whatever they may find ... including human flesh. They fight their way through them, thanks to Jake's courage and Roland's sandalwood-inlaid guns.

Perhaps a week's travel further on (in the darkness, both Jake and the gunslinger find time nearly incalculable), they come to a trestle which bridges a wide chasm through which the river has cut its path. The trestle is old and rotted but they can see daylight on the far side. They begin to walk across, leaving the handcar behind.

They have nearly negotiated all of the harrowing passage when the man in black appears at the exit-point. Almost simultaneously, the rotted metal ties Jake has been standing on give way. He falls ... and dangles by one hand. And, from a mere thirty yards ahead, the man in black issues his challenge to Roland, the last gunslinger: "Come now .. or catch me never."

After a moment of agonizing choice, the gunslinger leaves Jake to fall into the abyss, electing to follow the man in black; even at the price of his soul, he is unable to give up his quest for the Tower.

"Go then," Jake calls to him as he falls. "There are other worlds than these."

The gunslinger emerges. The man in black is there. And the gunslinger follows him in broken boots to the place of counseling.

The man in black led him to an ancient killing ground to make palaver. The gunslinger knew it immediately; a golgotha, place-of-the-skull. And bleached skulls stared blandly up at them — cattle, coyotes, deer, rabbits. Here the alabaster xylophone of a hen pheasant killed as she fed; there the tiny, delicate bones of a mole, perhaps

killed for pleasure by a wild dog.

The golgotha was a bowl indented into the descending slope of the mountain, and below, in easier altitudes, the gunslinger could see Joshua trees and scrub firs. The sky overhead was a softer blue than he had seen for a twelvemonth, and there was an indefinable something that spoke of the sea in the not-too-great distance.

I am in the West, Cuthbert, he thought wonderingly.

And of course in each skull, in each rondure of vacated eye, he saw the boy's face.

The man in black sat on an ancient ironwood log. His boots were powdered white with dust and the uneasy bonemeal of this place. He had put his hood up again, but the gunslinger could see the square shape of his chin clearly, and the shading of his jaw.

The shadowed lips twitched in a smile. "Gather wood, gunslinger. This side of the mountains is gentle, but at this altitude, the cold still may put a knife in one's belly. And this is a place of death, eh?"

"I'll kill you," the gunslinger said.

"No you won't. You can't. But you can gather wood to remember your Isaac."

The gunslinger had no understanding of the obscure reference. He went wordlessly and gathered wood like a common cook's boy. The pickings were slim. There was no devil-grass on this side and the ironwood would not burn. It had become stone. He returned finally with a large armload, powdered and dusted with disintegrated bone, as if dipped in flour. The sun had sunk beyond the highest Joshua trees and had taken on a reddish glow and peered at them with baleful indifference through the black, tortured branches.

"Excellent," the man in black said. "How exceptional you are! How methodical! I salute you!" He giggled, and the gunslinger dropped the wood at his feet with a crash that ballooned up bone dust.

The man in black did not start or jump; he merely began laying the fire. The gunslinger watched, fascinated, as the idiogram (fresh, this time) took shape. When it was finished, it resembled a small and complex double chimney about two feet high. The man in black lifted his hand skyward, shaking back the voluminous sleeve from a tapered, handsome hand, and brought it down rapidly, index and pinky fingers forked out in the traditional sign of the evil eye. There was a blue flash of flame, and their fire was lighted.

"I have matches," the man in black said jovially, "but I thought you might enjoy the magic. For a pretty, gunslinger. Now cook our dinner."

The folds of his robe shivered, and the plucked and gutted carcass of a plump rabbit fell on the dirt.

The gunslinger spitted the rabbit wordlessly and roasted it. A savory smell drifted up as the sun went down. Purple shadows drifted hungrily over

the bowl where the man in black had chosen to finally face him. The gunslinger felt hunger begin to rumble endlessly in his belly as the rabbit browned; but when the meat was cooked and its juices sealed in, he handed the entire skewer wordlessly to the man in black, rummaged in his own nearly flat knapsack, and withdrew the last of this jerky. It was salty, painful to his mouth, and tasted like tears.

"That's a worthless gesture," the man in black said, managing to sound angry and amused at the same time.

"Nevertheless," the gunslinger said. There were tiny sores in his mouth, the result of vitamin deprivation, and the salt taste made him grin bitterly.

"Are you afraid of enchanted meat?"

"Yes."

The man in black slipped his hood back.

The gunslinger looked at him silently. In a way, the face of the man in black was an uneasy disappointment. It was handsome and regular, with none of the marks and twists which indicate a person who has been through awesome times and who has been privy to great and unknown secrets. His hair was black and of a ragged, matted length. His forehead was high, his eyes dark and brilliant. His nose was nondescript. The lips were full and sensual. His complexion was pallid, as was the gunslinger's own.

He said finally, "I expected an older man.

"Not necessary. I am nearly immortal. I could have taken a face that you more expected, of course, but I elected to show you the one I was — ah — born with. See, gunslinger, the sunset."

The sun had departed already, and the western sky was filled with a sullen furnace light.

"You won't see another sunrise for what may seem a very long time," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger remembered the pit under the mountains and then looked at the sky, where the constellations sprawled in clockspring profusion.

"It doesn't matter," he said softly, "now."

The man in black shuffled the cards with flying, merging rapidity. The deck was huge, the design on the backs of the cards convoluted. "These are tarot cards," the man in black was saying, "a mixture of the standard deck and a selection of my own development. Watch closely, gunslinger."

"Why?"

"I'm going to tell your future, Roland. Seven cards must be turned, one at a time, and placed in conjunction with the others. I've not done this for over three hundred years. And I suspect I've never read one quite like yours." The mocking note was creeping in again, like a Kuvian night-soldier with a killing knife gripped in one hand. "You are the world's last adven-

turer. The last crusader. How that must please you, Roland! Yet you have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, how close in time. Worlds turn about your head."

"Read my fortune then," he said harshly.

The first card was turned.

"The Hanged Man," the man in black said. The darkness had given him back his hood. "Yet here, in conjunction with nothing else, it signifies strength and not death. You, gunslinger, are the Hanged Man, plodding ever onward toward your goal over all the pits of Hades. You have already dropped one co-traveler into the pit, have you not?"

He turned the second card. "The Sailor. Note the clear brow, the hairless cheeks, the wounded eyes. He drowns, gunslinger, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake."

The gunslinger winced, said nothing.

The third card was turned. A baboon stood grinningly astride a young man's shoulder. The young man's face was turned up, a grimace of stylized dread and horror on his features. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip.

"The Prisoner," the man in black said. The fire cast uneasy, flickering shadows over the face of the ridden man, making it seem to move and writhe in wordless terror. The gunslinger flicked his eyes away.

"A trifle upsetting, isn't he?" The man in black said, and seemed on the verge of sniggering.

He turned the fourth card. A woman with a shawl over her head sat spinning at a wheel. To the gunslinger's dazed eyes, she appeared to be smiling craftily and sobbing at the same time.

"The Lady of Shadows," the man in black remarked. "Does she look two-faced to you, gunslinger? She is. A veritable Janus."

"Why are you showing me these?"

"Don't ask!" The man in black said sharply, yet he smiled. "Don't ask. Merely watch. Consider this only pointless ritual if it eases you and cools you to do so. Like church."

He tittered and turned the fifth card.

A grinning reaper clutched a scythe with bony fingers. "Death," the man in black said simply. "Yet not for you."

The sixth card.

The gunslinger looked at it and felt a strange, crawling anticipation in his guts. The feeling was mixed with horror and joy, and the whole of the emotion was unnamable. It made him feel like throwing up and dancing at the same time.

"The Tower," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger's card occupied the center of the pattern; each of the following four stood at one corner, like satellites circling a star.

"Where does that one go?" The gunslinger asked.

The man in black placed The Tow-

er over the Hanged Man, covering it completely.

"What does that mean?" The gunslinger asked.

The man in black did not answer.

"What does that mean?" He asked raggedly.

The man in black did not answer.

"God damn you!"

No answer.

"Then what's the seventh card?"

The man in black turned the seventh. A sun rose in a luminously blue sky. Cupids and sprites sported around it.

"The seventh is Life," the man in black said softly. "But not for you."

"Where does it fit the pattern?"

"That is not for you to know," the man in black said. "Or for me to know." He flipped the card carelessly into the dying fire. It charred, curled and flashed to flame. The gunslinger felt his heart quail and turn icy in his chest.

"Sleep now," the man in black said carelessly. "Perchance to dream and that sort of thing."

"I'm going to choke you dead," the gunslinger said. His legs coiled with savage, splendid suddenness, and he flew across the fire at the other. The man in black, smiling, swelled in his vision and then retreated down a long and echoing corridor filled with obsidian pylons. The world filled with the sound of sardonic laughter, he was falling, dying, sleeping.

He dreamed.

The universe was void. Nothing moved. Nothing was.

The gunslinger drifted, bemused.

"Let us have light," the voice of the man in black said nonchalantly, and there was light. The gunslinger thought in a detached way that the light was good.

"Now darkness overhead with stars in it. Water down below." It happened. He drifted over endless seas. Above, the stars twinkled endlessly.

"Land," the man in black invited. There was; it heaved itself out of the water in endless, galvanic convulsions. It was red, arid, cracked and glazed with sterility. Volcanoes blurted endless magma like giant pimples on some ugly adolescent's baseball head.

"Okay," the man in black was saying. "That suits. Let's have some plants. Trees. Grass and fields."

There was. Dinosaurs rambled here and there, growling and whoofing and eating each other and getting stuck in bubbling, odiferous tarpits. Huge tropical rain-forests sprawled everywhere. Giant ferns waved at the sky with serrated leaves. Beetles with two heads crawled on some of them. All this the gunslinger saw. And yet he felt big.

"Now man," the man in black said softly, but the gunslinger was falling ... falling up. The horizon of this vast and fecund earth began to curve. Yes, they had all said it had curved, his teachers, they had claimed it had been proved long before the world had moved on. But this—

Further and further. Continents took shape before his amazed eyes, and were obscured with clocksprings of clouds. The world's atmosphere held it in a placental sac. And the sun, rising beyond the earth's shoulder—

He cried out and threw an arm before his eyes.

"Let there be light!" The voice that cried was no longer that of the man in black. It was gigantic, echoing. It filled space, and the spaces between spaces.

"Light!"

Falling, falling.

The sun shrank. A red planet crossed with canals whirled past him, two moons circling it furiously. A whirling belt of stones. A gigantic planet that seethed with gasses, too huge to support itself, oblate in consequence. A ringed world that glittered with its engirdlement of icy spicules.

"Light! Let there be—"

Other worlds, one, two, three. Far beyond the last, one lonely ball of ice and rock twirling in dead darkness about a sun that glittered no brighter than a tarnished penny.

Darkness.

"No," the gunslinger said, and his words were flat and echoless in the darkness. It was darker than dark. Beside it the darkest night of a man's soul was noonday. The darkness under the mountains was a mere smudge on the face of Light. "No more, please, no more now. No more—"

"LIGHT!"

"No more. No more, please—"

The stars themselves began to shrink. Whole nebulae drew together and became mindless smudges. The whole universe seemed to be drawing around him.

"Jesus no more no more no more—"

The voice of the man in black whispered silkily in his ear: "Then renege. Cast away all thoughts of the Tower. Go your way, gunslinger, and save your soul."

He gathered himself. Shaken and alone, enwrapt in the darkness, terrified of an ultimate meaning rushing at him, he gathered himself and uttered the final, flashing imperative:

"NO! NEVER!"

"THEN LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And there was light, crashing in on him like a hammer, a great and primordial light. In it, consciousness perished — but before it did, the gunslinger saw something of cosmic importance. He clutched it with agonized effort and sought himself.

He fled the insanity the knowledge implied, and so came back to himself.

It was still night — whether the same or another, he had no way of knowing. He pushed himself up from where his demon spring at the man in black had carried him and looked at the ironwood where the man in black had been sitting. He was gone.

A great sense of despair flooded him — God, all that to do over again

— and then the man in black said from behind him: "Over here, gunslinger. I don't like you so close. You talk in your sleep." He tittered.

The gunslinger got groggily to his knees and turned around. The fire had burned down to red embers and gray ashes, leaving the familiar decayed pattern of exhausted fuel. The man in black was seated next to it, smacking his lips over the greasy remains of the rabbit.

"You did fairly well," the man in black said. "I never could have sent that vision to Marten. He would have come back drooling."

"What was it?" The gunslinger asked. His words were blurred and shaky. He felt that if he tried to rise, his legs would buckle.

"The universe," the man in black said carelessly. He burped and threw the bones into the fire where they glistened with unhealthy whiteness. The wind above the cup of the golgotha whistled with keen unhappiness.

"Universe," the gunslinger said blankly.

"You want the Tower," the man in black said. It seemed to be a question.

"Yes."

"But you shan't have it," the man in black said, and smiled with bright cruelty. "I have an idea of how close to the edge that last pushed you. The Tower will kill you half a world away."

"You know nothing of me," the gunslinger said quietly, and the smile faded from the other's lips.

"I made your father and I broke him," the man in black said grimly. "I came to your mother through Marten and took her. It was written, and it was. I am the furthest minion of the Dark Tower. Earth has been given into my hand."

"What did I see?" The gunslinger asked. "At the end? What was it?"

"What did it seem to be?"

The gunslinger was silent, thoughtful. He felt for his tobacco, but there was none. The man in black did not offer to refill his poke by either black magic or white.

"There was light," the gunslinger said finally. "Great white light. And then—" He broke off and stared at the man in black. He was leaning forward, and an alien emotion was stamped on his face, writ too large for lies or denial. Wonder.

"You don't know," he said, and began to smile. "O great sorcerer who brings the dead to life. You don't know."

"I know," the man in black said. "But I don't know ... what."

"White light," the gunslinger repeated. "And then — a blade of grass. One single blade of grass that filled everything. And I was tiny. Infinitesimal."

"Grass." The man in black closed his eyes. His face looked drawn and haggard. "A blade of grass. Are you sure?"

"Yes." The gunslinger frowned.

"But it was purple."

And so the man in black began to speak.

The universe (he said) offers a paradox too great for the finite mind to grasp. As the living brain cannot conceive of a nonliving brain — although it may think it can — the finite mind cannot grasp the infinite.

The prosaic fact of the universe's existence single-handedly defeats the the pragmatist and the cynic. There was a time, yet a hundred generations before the world moved on, when mankind had achieved enough technical and scientific prowess to chip a few splinters from the great stone pillar of reality. Even then, the false light of science (knowledge, if you like) shone in only a few developed countries.

Yet, despite a tremendous increase in available facts, there were remarkably few insights. Gunslinger, our fathers conquered the-disease-which-rots, which we call cancer, almost conquered aging, went to the moon—

("I don't believe that," the gunslinger said flatly, to which the man in black merely smiled and answered, "You needn't.")

—and made or discovered a hundred other marvelous baubles. But this wealth of information produced little or no insight. There were no great odes written to the wonders of artificial insemination—

("What?" "Having babies from frozen mansperm." "Bullshit." "As you wish ... although not even the ancients could produce children from that material.")

—or to the car-which-moves. Few if any seemed to have grasped the Principle of Reality; new knowledge leads always to yet more awesome mysteries. Greater psysiological knowledge of the brain makes the existence of the soul less possible yet more probable by the nature of the search. Do you see? Of course you don't. You are surrounded by your own romantic aura, you lie cheek and jowl daily with the arcane. Yet now you approach the limits — not of belief, but of comprehension. You face reverse entropy of the soul.

But to the more prosaic:

The greatest mystery the universe offers is not life but size. Size encompasses life, and the Tower encompasses size. The child, who is most at home with wonder, says: Daddy, what is above the sky? And the father says: The darkness of space. The child: What is beyond space? The father: The galaxy. The child: Beyond the galaxy? The father: Another galaxy. The child: Beyond the other galaxies? The father; No one knows.

You see? Size defeats us. For the fish, the lake in which he lives is the universe. What does the fish think when he is jerked up by the mouth through the silver limits of existence and into a new universe where the air drowns him and the light is blue madness? Where huge bipeds with no gills

stuff it into a suffocating box and cover it with wet weeds to die?

Or one might take the point of a pencil and magnify it. One reaches the point where a stunning realization strikes home: The pencil point is not solid; it is composed of atoms which whirl and revolve like a trillion demon planets. What seems solid to us is actually only a loose net held together by gravitation. Shrunk to the correct size, the distances between these atoms might become leagues, gulfs, aeons. The atoms themselves are composed of nuclei and revolving protons and electrons. One may step down further to subatomic particles. And then to what? Nothing? Of course not. Everything in the universe denies nothing; to suggest conclusions to things is one impossibility.

If you fell outward to the limit of the universe, would you find a board fence and signs reading DEAD END? No. You might find something hard and rounded, as the chick must see the egg from the inside. And if you should peck through that shell, what great and torrential light might shine through your hole at the end of space? Might you look through and discover our entire universe is but part of one atom on a blade of grass? Might you be forced to think that by burning a twig you incinerate an eternity of eternities? That existence rises not to one infinite but to an infinity of them?"

Perhaps you saw what place our universe plays in the scheme of things — as an atom in a blade of grass. Could it be that everything we can perceive, from the infinitesimal virus to the distant Horsehead Nebula, is contained in one blade of grass ... a blade that may have existed for only a day or two in an alien time-flow? What if that blade should be cut off by a scythe? When it began to die, would the rot seep into our own universe and our own lives, turning everything yellow and brown and desiccated? Perhaps it's already begun to happen. We say the world has moved on; maybe we really mean that it has begun to dry up.

Think how small such a concept of things makes us, gunslinger! If a God watches over it all, does he actually mete out justice for a race of gnats among an infinitude of races of gnats? Does his eye see the sparrow fall when the sparrow is less than a speck of hydrogen floating disconnected in the depth of space? And if he does see ... what must the nature of such a God be? Where does He live? How is it possible to live beyond infinity?

Imagine the sand of the Mohaine Desert, which you crossed to find me, and imagine a trillion universes — not worlds but universes — encapsulated in each grain of that desert; and within each universe an infinity of others. We tower over these universes from our pitiful grass vantage point; with one swing of your boot you may knock a billion billion worlds flying off into darkness, in a chain never to be completed.

Size, gunslinger ... size....

Yet suppose further. Suppose that all worlds, all universes, met in a single nexus, a single pylon, a Tower. A stairway, perhaps, to the Godhead itself. Would you dare, gunslinger? Could it be that somewhere above all of endless reality, there exists a Room...?

You dare not.

You dare not.

"Someone has dared," the gunslinger said.

"Who would that be?"

"God," the gunslinger said softly. His eyes gleamed. "God has dared ... or is the room empty, seer?"

"I don't know." Fear passed over the man in black's bland face, as soft and dark as a buzzard's wing. "And, furthermore, I don't ask. It might be unwise."

"Afraid of being struck dead?" The gunslinger asked sardonically.

"Perhaps afraid of an accounting," the man in black replied, and there was silence for a while. The night was very long. The Milky Way sprawled above them in great splendor, yet terrifying in its emptiness. The gunslinger wondered what he would feel if that inky sky should split open and let in a torrent of light.

"The fire," he said. "I'm cold."

The gunslinger drowsed and awoke to see the man in black regarding him avidly, unhealthily.

"What are you staring at?"

"You, of course."

"Well, don't." He poked up the fire, ruining the precision of the idiogram. "I don't like it." He looked to the east to see if there was the beginning of light, but this night went on and on.

"You seek the light so soon?"

"I was made for light."

"Ah, so you were! And so impolitic of me to forget the fact! Yet we have much to discuss yet, you and I. For so has it been told to me by my master."

"Who?"

The man in black smiled. "Shall we tell the truth then, you and I? No more lies? No more glammer?"

"Glammer? What does that mean?"

But the man in black persisted: "Shall there be truth between us, as two men? Not as friends, but as enemies and equals? There is an offer you will get rarely, Roland. Only enemies speak the truth. Friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty."

"Then we'll speak the truth." He had never spoken less on this night. "Start by telling me what glammer is."

"Glammer is enchantment, gunslinger. My master's enchantment has prolonged this night and will prolong it still ... until our business is done."

"How long will that be?"

"Long. I can tell you no better. I do not know myself." The man in black stood over the fire, and the glowing embers made patterns on his face. "Ask. I will tell you what I know. You have caught me. It is fair; I did not

think you would. Yet your quest has only begun. Ask. It will lead us to business soon enough."

"Who is your master?"

"I have never seen him, but you must. In order to reach the Tower you must reach this one first, the Ageless Stranger." The man in black smiled spitelessly. "You must slay him, gunslinger. Yet I think it is not what you wished to ask."

"If you've never seen him, how do you know him?"

"He came to me once in a dream. As a stripling he came to me, when I lived in a far land. A thousand years ago, or five or ten. He came to me in days before the old ones had yet to cross the sea. In a land called England. A sheaf of centuries ago he imbued me with my duty, although there were errands in between my youth and my apotheosis. You are that, gunslinger." He tittered. "You see, someone has taken you seriously."

"This Stranger has no name?"

"O, he is named."

"And what is his name?"

"Maerlyn," the man in black said softly, and somewhere in the easterly darkness where the mountains lay a rockslide punctuated his words and a puma screamed like a woman. The gunslinger shivered and the man in black flinched. "Yet I do not think that is what you wished to ask, either. It is not your nature to think so far ahead."

The gunslinger knew the question; it had gnawed him all this night, and he thought, for years before. It trembled on his lips but he didn't ask it ... not yet.

"This Stranger, this Maerlyn, is a minion of the Tower? Like yourself?"

"Much greater than I. It has been given to him to live backward in time. He *darkles*. He *tincts*. He is in all times. Yet there is one greater than he."

"Who?"

"The Beast," the man in black whispered fearfully. "The keeper of the Tower. The originator of all *glammer*.

"What is it? What does this Beast—"

"Ask me no more!" The man in black cried. His voice aspired to sternness and crumbled into beseechment. "I know not! I do not wish to know. To speak of the Beast is to speak of the ruination of one's own soul. Before It, Maerlyn is as I am to him."

"And beyond the Beast is the Tower and whatever the Tower contains?"

"Yes," whispered the man in black. "But none of these things are what you wish to ask."

True.

"All right," the gunslinger said, and then asked the world's oldest question. "Do I know you? Have I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yes."

"Where?" The gunslinger leaned forward urgently. This was a question of his destiny.

The man in black clapped his hands to his mouth and giggled through them

like a small child. "I think you know."

"*Where!*" He was on his feet; his hands had dropped to the worn butts of his guns.

"Not with those, gunslinger. Those do not open doors; those only close them forever."

"Where?" The gunslinger reiterated.

"Must I give him a hint?" The man in black asked the darkness. "I believe I must."He looked at the gunslinger with eyes that burned. "There was a man who gave you advice," he said. "Your teacher—"

"Yes, Cort," the gunslinger interrupted impatiently.

"The advice was to wait. It was bad advice. For even then Marten's plans against your father had proceeded. And when your father returned—"

"He was killed," the gunslinger said emptily.

"And when you turned and looked, Marten was gone ... gone west. Yet there was a man in Marten's entourage, a man who affected the dress of a monk and the shaven head of a penitent—"

"Walter," the gunslinger whispered. "You ... you're not Marten at all. You're *Walter!*"

The man in black tittered. "At your service."

"I ought to kill you now."

"That would hardly be fair. After all, it was I who delivered Marten into your hand three years later, when—"

"Then you've controlled me."

"In some ways, yes. But no more, gunslinger. Now comes the time of sharing. Then, in the morning, I will cast the runes. Dreams will come to you. And then your real quest must begin."

"Walter," the gunslinger repeated, stunned.

"Sit," the man in black invited. "I tell you my story. Yours, I think, will be much longer."

"I don't talk of myself," the gunslinger muttered.

"Yet tonight you must. So that we may understand."

"Understand what? My purpose? You know that. To find the Tower is my purpose. I'm sworn."

"Not your purpose, gunslinger. Your mind. Your slow, plodding, tenacious mind. There has never been one quite like it, in all the history of the world. Perhaps in the history of creation.

"This is the time of speaking. This is the time of histories."

"Then speak."

The man in black shook the voluminous arm of his robe. A foil-wrapped package fell out and caught the dying embers in many reflective folds.

"Tobacco, gunslinger. Would you smoke?"

He had been able to resist the rabbit, but he could not resist this. He opened the foil with eager fingers. There was fine crumbled tobacco inside, and green leaves to wrap it in, amazingly moist. He had not seen such

tobacco for ten years.

He rolled two cigarettes and bit the ends of each to release flavor. He offered one to the man in black, who took it. Each of them took a burning twig from the fire.

The gunslinger lit his cigarette and drew the aromatic smoke deep into his lungs, closing his eyes to concentrate the senses. He blew out with long, slow satisfaction.

"Is it good?" the man in black enquired.

"Yes. Very good."

"Enjoy it. It may be the last smoke for you in a very long time."

The gunslinger took this impassively.

"Very well, " the man in black said. "To begin then:

"You must understand that the Tower has always been, and there have always been boys who know of it and lust for it, more than power or riches or women...."

There was talk then, a night's worth of talk and God alone knew how much more, but the Gunslinger remembered little of it later ... and to his oddly practical mind, little of it seemed to matter. The man in black told him that he must go to the sea, which lay no more than twenty easy miles to the west, and there he would be invested with the power of *drawing*.

"But that's not exactly right, either," the man in black said, pitching his cigarette into the remains of the campfire. "No one wants to invest you with a power of any kind, gunslinger; it is simply in you, and I am compelled to tell you, partly because of the sacrifice of the boy, and partly because it is the law; the natural law of things. Water must run downhill, and you must be told. You will draw three, I understand ... but I don't really care, and I don't really want to know."

"The three," the gunslinger murmured, thinking of the Oracle.

"And then the fun begins. But, by then, I'll be long gone. Good-bye, gunslinger. My part is done now. The chain is still in your hands. Beware it doesn't wrap itself around your neck."

Compelled by something outside him, Roland said, "You have one more thing to say, don't you?"

"Yes," the man in black said, and he smiled at the gunslinger with his depthless eyes and stretched one of his hands out toward him. "Let there be light."

And there was light.

Roland awoke by the ruins of the campfire to find himself ten years older. His black hair had thinned at the temples and gone the gray of cobwebs at the end of autumn. The lines in his face were deeper, his skin rougher.

The remains of the wood he had carried had turned to ironwood, and the man in black was a laughing skeleton in a rotting black robe, more bones in this place of bones, one more skull in golgotha.

The gunslinger stood up and looked around. He looked at the light and saw that the light was good.

With a sudden quick gesture he reached toward the remains of his companion of the night before ... a night that had somehow lasted ten years. He broke off Walter's jawbone and jammed it carelessly into the left hip pocket of his jeans — a fitting enought replacement for the one lost under the mountains.

The Tower. Somewhere ahead, it waited for him — the nexus of Time, the nexus of Size.

He began west again, his back set against the sunrise, heading toward the ocean, realizing that a great passage of his life had come and gone. "I loved you, Jake," he said aloud.

The stiffness wore out of his body and he began to walk more rapidly. By that evening he had come to the end of the land. He sat on a beach which stretched left and right forever, deserted. The waves beat endlessly against the shore, pounding and pounding. The setting sun painted the water in a wide strip of fool's gold.

There the gunslinger sat, his face turned up into the fading light. He dreamed his dreams and watched as the stars came out; his purpose did not flag, nor did his heart falter; his hair, finer now and gray, blew around his head, and the sandalwood-inlaid guns of his father lay smooth and deadly against his hips, and he was lonely but did not find loneliness in any way a bad or ignoble thing. The dark came down on the world and the world moved on. The gunslinger waited for the time of the *drawing* and dreamed his long dreams of the Dark Tower, to which he would some day come at dusk and approach, winding his horn, to do some unimaginable final battle.

This ends the fifth and last section of the First Cycle of the Dark Tower — the story of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his search for the Tower that stands at the root of time.

Normally we buy stories like this one only from relatives and very close friends, but Sanasardo was so outrageous it won us over. Mr. Ryan's longer fiction includes two novels, PANTHER! and THE KILL, forthcoming from Ballantine.

Sanasardo Meets Attila

BY
ALAN RYAN

"This is intolerable!" cried newly appointed StelFed Ambassador Seamus FitzChang Sanasardo. "Four days notice before departure! Is this why I campaigned so hard and so long? To be treated like this? Is this the thanks I get for helping the President get elected? Now I ask you!"

He wasn't really asking, of course, and his personal assistant, Antonio Valerian O'Toole, knew better than to answer the question. His life had been hard enough for the last two days, ever since his own last-minute assignment as the Ambassador's aide. He sighed, resigned himself once again to his fate and, choosing his words carefully, tried to steer the Ambassador's attention back to the business at hand.

They were in the last desperate throes of preparing for the Ambassador's journey to his post, the gigantic planet called Attila. In only two days now, the ship would be departing and O'Toole still had a long list of items that had to be prepared: diplomatic papers that had to be in absolutely perfect order, ceremonial garb that had to reflect in its finery and perfection the dignity of the Ambassador and the Stellar Federation he represented, and — the item O'Toole was trying to get settled at the moment — carefully chosen gifts for the dignitaries of Attila.

"There's the matter of the gifts, Excellency," he said.

The Ambassador made a sour face and turned away. O'Toole quickly consulted his notes before speaking.

"As I'm sure you know, Excellency, Attila is inhabited by two distinct peoples. They're rather different in their, uh, lifestyles, but I do think we can simplify matters somewhat by bringing a large quantity of cheese and dividing it equally between them."

"*Cheese?*" the Ambassador said.

"Yes, Excellency, Rie cheese." Rie was an ancient dairy product, formerly known as Brie until modern manufacturing methods had caused it to lose its bite. Still, it was a tasty delicacy. "Our field reports indicate," O'Toole hurried on, "that both peoples enjoy it immensely, especially after it's been allowed to stand out in the Attilan air for a few hours. The atmosphere there changes its consistency into something rather ... well, sort of thread-like. Noodle-y, if you see what I mean. They like it that way," he finished lamely.

"Good Lord," the Ambassador said. "Sounds perfectly horrid. Well, all right, at least it will do for both of them. What else?"

"Then they'll each have to get a unique gift, something chosen especially for them. Now, I think, for the Toe people—"

"The *what*?"

O'Toole knew very well that the Ambassador hadn't done his homework and that he himself was walking a thin diplomatic line by explaining.

"I'm sure you're familiar with them, Excellency," he said quickly. "The intelligent race that joins their rather tiny bodies into one large being in the shape of a human toe?"

"Oh, yes, of course, of course, the Toe people," the Ambassador murmured.

"I thought that, since the winters are very cold on Attila, perhaps we could provide a suitable shelter for the Toe people. Say, a nice woolly sock or a boot or something."

The Ambassador cast his eyes heavenward.

"Do it," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

O'Toole hastily consulted his list. "The other people," he said, "the Wunn-ee, will have to get something very different. I thought perhaps a large supply of mun. According to reports from the first mission, they seemed to enjoy smearing it on their heads. I thought—"

"Yes, yes," the Ambassador said quickly. His eyes were still cast upward toward the heavens and O'Toole thought he heard him mutter, "Why me, God?" but he couldn't be sure. "What else?" the Ambassador asked out loud.

"Something for the ruler of Attila," O'Toole answered. "He's a Wunn-ee named Nanook M'Botu Fo. I understand he's a trifle odd, sir. I'm a little stumped on that one."

The Ambassador was now eager to get this over with. "What do we know about him?" he snapped.

"Well," O'Toole replied, "he started his climb to political power as a clerk-typist, then went on to selling real estate and, when nobody was looking, which seemed to be all the time, engineered a coup that made him ruler. He's actually a rather quiet, mild-mannered person, looks a little

like Bob Newhart, a comedian of the twentieth—"

"Never mind that," the Ambassador interrupted. "I know the type, even if he is a Wunn-ee. Literary, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," O'Toole said with some surprise. "There are rumors in the palace that he stays up late at night, reading under the covers. Really quite stra—"

The Ambassador cut him off with a wave of his hand. He turned to a bookshelf behind him, searched for a second, then pulled out a single paperback volume and dropped it into his valise that lay open on the floor. O'Toole couldn't make out what it was except for "#796" on the cover.

"All right, that's settled," the Ambassador said with satisfaction. "Now see about all that other muck."

O'Toole checked off the last item on his list and hurried from the room.

The next day and a half passed in a flurry of activity and, in no time at all, it seemed, Ambassador Sanasardo was being strapped into a comfortable couch for his journey aboard the ship to Attila. His mood, by now, was somewhat improved. O'Toole was turning out to be highly efficient and that would ease his own path considerably. Yes, he thought, this post might just turn out very comfy after all, if only nothing went wrong at the last minute. His reveries were interrupted by the arrival of O'Toole, who was quickly strapped into the couch beside him.

"You understand, O'Toole," the Ambassador said gruffly as soon as they were alone, "I shall hold you personally responsible if anything goes wrong. Are the gifts all taken care of?" he asked uneasily. "If anything goes wrong with the gifts...."

"Excellency, I just watched them being packed away myself, except for the one you're carrying in your own bag."

"Go through the list," the Ambassador said. "We can't be too careful about these things, you know."

O'Toole sighed but began reciting the list, ticking off each item on his fingers.

"Mun for the Wunn-ee, shoe for the Toe, Rie to get thready...."

The Ambassador smiled as he reached down and patted the suitcase under his couch. "And *Gor* to Fo!"

Films

BAIRD SEARLES

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

IO NOON OR NOT OUTLANDISH ENOUGH

(There is utter disagreement among my dictionaries as to the pronunciation of *Io*, second satellite of Jupiter, but the title of this piece assumes a long *i*.)

One of the oldest dictums about writing science fiction is that the plot of an s/f story should grow out of its science-fictional elements. In other words, you can't just transfer a Western to Mars, give the characters, horses, and cows exotic names, and expect to end up with an even passable piece of s/f.

That's the example most commonly given to illustrate that dictum, and by golly, wouldn't you know that some dopey filmmaker would go and do almost exactly that? The movies never cease to amaze me by the obtuseness of their ceators.

It's only a day after *Outland* opened as I write this, and already I feel I'm perpetuating a cliche when I say that it is *High Noon* transferred to a future mining colony on Io. But it is made so incredibly obvious that there is no way you can get away without mentioning it.

For those who may by some incredible fortune not have seen *High Noon*, it's the one about the new, honest marshall who won't go along with the high level corruption he finds in the town that he's marshalling. His wife leaves him, the townfolk are too scared or indifferent to help, and the noon train is

bringing in gunsels who are aiming to get him. Just substitute *shuttle* for *train* and you have *Outland*.

So it's pretty bad science fiction — that rule couldn't have been better illustrated. There's a flatness about it; it's boring despite a lot of action and a not unintelligent production. Even the outside shots of the mining station, with Jupiter hanging enormously above it, are competent as effects, but still tedious. And while the interiors are just what you'd expect — a bar, dimly lit with writhing, nearly-nude dancers as trashy entertainment; an apartment, all metal bulkheads and space-saving furniture; a low-ceilinged cafeteria; a dormitory whose bunks become individual cubicles — that's part of the problem, too; because it *is* just what you'd expect. You're given no surprises, nothing of that wonderful feeling of saying to yourself, "Of course, that's the way it will be, but I'd never have thought of that." Anything in this film could have been envisioned by the rawest of science fiction readers.

Sean Connery, who has made his mark in the annals of science fiction film with the lead in *Zardoz*, is his usual more-than-competent self as the marshall. And Frances Sternhagen provides some welcome interest as a sharp-tongued, middle-aged female doctor, combining the *High Noon* characters of Thomas and Katie Jurado.

For all I know, people who are *not* science fiction readers may find this an absorbing movie. One tries, in the particular circumstances of this column, to judge a film as to its quality as science fiction (or fantasy), and its quality as a film. In this case, because it is such *bad* s/f, because it makes the prime mistake of transferring a Western to another world, I'm simply unable to judge it as a movie.

A while back, if you remember, I gave a favorable notice to the syndicated film made for TV from John D. MacDonald's *The Girl, The Gold Watch and Everything*. Now a sequel has appeared, also syndicated (which means it could turn up, or could have turned up, any time on any station), called *The Girl, The Gold Watch and Dynamite*.

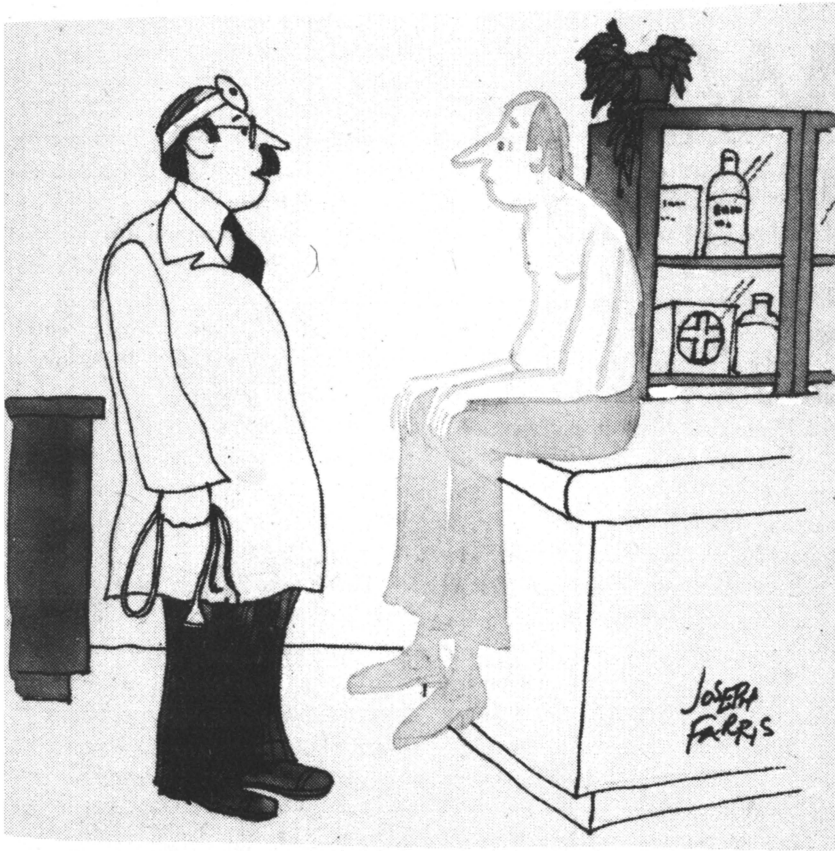
Certainly one of the things I liked about the first one was MacDonald's antic sense of humor, which showed up in the plot as much as the dialogue. *Dynamite*, written in toto by someone else, was far less original in plot. The klutzy hero, who has inherited a watch that will stop time for everyone but its user, therefore enabling him or her to accomplish all sorts of things invisibly, must save the old homestead of his fiancee's parents, who are about to be done out of it by greedy land developers.

This tired plot was saved, though, by some surprisingly sophisticated handling. The comic relief, a hick named Hoover, had a sure cure for insomnia, for instance. Oh, no, not pills.

"Just watch Tom Snyder's program for five minutes. That will do it for sure."

Which brings up another subtle plus for the writing. All the characters seem to watch and talk about television. *Real* television. Now television, in various aspects, comes up fairly often in my daily conversation. But did you ever notice that nobody *on* television seems to know anything *about* television.

This illustrates neatly another rule for writing s/f. If you want to make the reader (or viewer) believe the fantastic elements of your story, make the rest as lifelike as possible. It worked well here, even if the watch was used a little too sparingly. But the in between bits at least kept me amused, which I can't say for too many science fiction films even now.



"You're suffering from underexposure."

In which a young couple, touring the ancient ruins and beautiful countryside of southwest England, have their lives changed by something as simple and as mysterious as a maze in an open field....

Treading the Maze

BY

LISA TUTTLE

We had seen the bed and breakfast sign from the road, and although it was still daylight and there was no hurry to settle, we had liked the look of the large, well-kept house amid the farmlands, and the name on the sign: The Old Vicarage.

Phil parked the Mini on the curving gravel drive. "No need for you to get out," he said. "I'll just pop in and ask."

I got out anyway, just to stretch my legs and feel the warmth of the late, slanting sunrays on my bare arms. It was a beautiful afternoon. There was a smell of manure on the air, but it wasn't unpleasant, mingling with the other country smells. I walked towards the hedge which divided the garden from the fields beyond. There was a low stone wall along the drive, and I climbed onto it to look over the hedge and into the field.

There was a man standing there, all alone in the middle of the field. He was too far away for me to make out his features, but something about the sight of that still figure gave me a chill. I was suddenly afraid he would turn his head and see me watching him, and I clambered down hastily.

"Amy?" Phil was striding towards me, his long face alight. "It's a lovely room — come and see."

The room was upstairs, with a huge soft bed, an immense wooden wardrobe, and a big, deep-set window, which I cranked open. I stood looking out over the fields.

There was no sign of the man I had just seen, and I couldn't imagine where he had vanished to so quickly.

"Shall we plan to have dinner in Glastonbury?" Phil asked, combing his hair before the mirror inside the wardrobe door. "There should still be enough of the day left to see the Abbey."

I looked at the position of the sun in the sky. "And we can climb the tor tomorrow."

"*You* can climb the tor tomorrow morning. I've had about enough of all this climbing of ancient hills and monuments — Tintagel, St. Michael's Mount, Cadbury Castle, Silbury Hill—"

"We didn't climb Silbury Hill. Silbury Hill had a fence around it."

"And a good thing, too, or you'd have made me climb it." He came up behind me and hugged me fiercely.

I relaxed against him, feeling as if my bones were melting. Keeping my voice brisk, mock-scolding, I said, "I didn't complain about showing you all the wonders of America last year. So the least you can do now is return the favor with ancient wonders of Britain. I know you grew up with all this stuff, but I didn't. We don't have anything like Silbury Hill or Glastonbury Tor where I come from."

"If you did, if there was a Glastonbury Tor in America, they'd have a lift up the side of it," he said.

"Or at least a drive-through window."

We both began laughing helplessly.

I think of us standing there in that room, by the open window, holding each other and laughing — I think of us standing there like that forever.

Dinner was a mixed grill in a Glastonbury cafe. Our stroll through the Abbey grounds took longer than we'd thought, and we were late, arriving at the cafe just as the proprietress was about to close up. Phil teased and charmed her into staying open and cooking for two last customers. Grey-haired, fat and nearly toothless, she lingered by our table throughout our meal to continue her flirtation with Phil. He obliged, grinning and joking and flattering, but every time her back was turned, he winked at me or grabbed my leg beneath the table, making coherent conversation impossible on my part.

When we got back to the Old Vicarage, we were roped into having tea with the couple who ran the place and the other guests. That late in the summer there were only two others, an elderly couple from Belgium.

The electric fire was on and the lounge was much too warm. The heat made it seem even smaller than it was. I drank my sweet milky tea, stroked the old white dog who lay near my feet, and gazed admiringly at Phil, who kept up one end of a conversation about the weather, the countryside, and World War II.

Finally the last of the tea was consumed, the box of cookies had made the rounds three times, and we could escape to the cool, empty sanctuary of our room. There we stripped off our clothes, climbed into the big soft bed, talked quietly of private things, and made love.

I hadn't been asleep long before I came awake, aware that I was alone in the bed. We hadn't bothered to draw

the curtains, and the moonlight was enough to show me Phil sitting on the wide window-ledge smoking a cigarette.

I sat up. "Can't you sleep?"

"Just my filthy habit." He waved the lit cigarette; I didn't see, but could imagine, the sheepish expression on his face. "I didn't want to disturb you."

He took one last, long drag and stubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray. He rose, and I saw that he was wearing his woolen pullover, which hung to his hips, just long enough for modesty, but leaving his long, skinny legs bare.

I giggled.

"What's that?"

"You without your trousers."

"That's right, make fun. Do I laugh at you when you wear a dress?"

He turned away towards the window, leaning forward to open it a little more. "It's a beautiful night ... cor!" He straightened up in surprise.

"What?"

"Out there — people. I don't know what they're doing. They seem to be dancing, out in the field."

Half-suspecting a joke, despite the apparently genuine note of surprise in his voice, I got up and joined him at the window, wrapping my arms around myself against the cold. Looking out where he was gazing, I saw them. They were indisputably human figures — five, or perhaps six or seven, of them, all moving about in a shifting spiral, like some sort of children's game or country dance.

And then I saw it. It was like suddenly comprehending an optical illusion. One moment, bewilderment; but, the next, the pattern was clear.

"It's a maze," I said. "Look at it, it's marked out in the grass."

"A turf-maze," Phil said, wondering.

Among the people walking that ancient, ritual path, one suddenly paused and looked up, seemingly directly at us. In the pale moonlight and at that distance I couldn't tell if it were a man or a woman. It was just a dark figure with a pale face turned up towards us.

I remembered then that I had seen someone standing in that very field, perhaps in that same spot, earlier in the day, and I shivered. Phil put his arm around me and drew me close.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"There are remnants of traditions about dancing or running through mazes all over the country," Phil said. "Most of the old turf-mazes have vanished — people stopped keeping them up before this century. They're called troy-towns, or mizmazes ... no one knows when or why they began, or if treading the maze was game or ritual, or what the purpose was."

Another figure now paused beside the one who stood still, and laid hold of that one's arm, and seemed to say something. And then the two figures fell back into the slow circular dance.

"I'm cold," I said. I was shivering uncontrollably, although it was not with any physical chill. I gave up the

comfort of Phil's arm and ran for the bed.

"They might be witches," Phil said. "Hippies from Glastonbury, trying to revive an old custom. Glastonbury does attract some odd types."

I had burrowed under the bedclothes, only the top part of my face left uncovered, and was waiting for my teeth to stop chattering and for the warmth to penetrate my muscles.

"I could go out and ask them who they are," Phil said. His voice sounded odd. "I'd like to know who they are. I feel as if I *should* know."

I stared at his back, alarmed. "Phil, you're not going out there!"

"Why not? This isn't New York City. I'd be perfectly safe."

I sat up, letting the covers fall. "Phil, don't."

He turned away from the window to face me. 'What's the matter?"

I couldn't speak.

"Amy ... you're not crying?" His voice was puzzled and gentle. He came to the bed and held me.

"Don't leave me," I whispered against the rough weave of his sweater.

"Course I won't," he said, stroking my hair and kissing me. "Course I won't."

But of course he did, less than two months later, in a way neither of us could have guessed then. But even then, watching the dancers in the maze, even then he was dying.

In the morning, as we were settling our bill, Phil mentioned the people we had seen dancing in the field during the night. The landlord was flatly disbelieving.

"Sure you weren't dreaming?"

"Quite sure," said Phil. "I wondered if it was some local custom...."

He snorted. "Some custom! Dancing around a field in the dead of night!"

"There's a turf-maze out there," Phil began.

But the man was shaking his head. "No, not in that field. Not a maze!"

Phil was patient. "I don't mean one with hedges, like in Hampton Court. Just a turf-maze, a pattern made in the soil years ago. It's hardly noticeable now, although it can't have been too many years since it was allowed to grow back. I've seen them other places and read about them, and in the past there were local customs of running the maze, or dancing through it, or playing games. I thought some such custom might have been revived locally."

The man shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. We had learned the night before that the man and his wife were "foreigners," having only settled here, from the north of England, some twenty years before. Obviously, he wasn't going to be much help with information on local traditions.

After we had loaded our bags into the car, Phil hesitated, looking toward the hedge. "I'd quite like to have a look at that maze close-to," he said.

My heart sank, but I could think of no rational reason to stop him. Feebly I

tried, "We shouldn't trespass on somebody else's property...."

"Walking across a field isn't trespassing!" He began to walk along the hedge, towards the road. Because I didn't want him to go alone, I hurried after. There was a gate a few yards along the road by which we entered the field. But once there, I wondered how we would find the maze. Without an overview such as our window had provided, the high grass looked all the same, and from this level, in ordinary daylight, slight alterations in ground-level wouldn't be obvious to the eye.

Phil looked back at the house, getting in alignment with the window, then turned and looked across the field, his eyes narrowed as he tried to calculate distance. Then he began walking slowly, looking down often at the ground. I hung back, following him at a distance and not myself looking for the maze. I didn't want to find it. Although I couldn't have explained my reaction, the maze frightened me, and I wanted to be away, back on the road again, alone together in the little car, eating apples, gazing at the passing scenery, talking.

"Ah!"

I stopped still at Phil's triumphant cry and watched as he hopped from one foot to the other. One foot was clearly on higher ground. He began to walk in a curious, up-down fashion. "I think this is it," he called. "I think I've found it. If the land continues to dip ... yes, yes, this is it!" He stopped walking and looked back at me, beaming.

"Great," I said.

"The grass has grown back where once it was kept cleared, but you can still feel the place where the swathe was cut," He said, rocking back and forth to demonstrate the confines of the shallow ditch. "Come and see."

"I'll take your word for it," I said.

He cocked his head. "I thought you'd be interested. I thought something like this would be right up your alley. The funny folkways of the ancient Brits."

I shrugged, unable to explain my unease.

"We've plenty of time, love," he said. "I promise we'll climb Glastonbury Tor before we push on. But we're here now, and I'd like to get the feel of this." He stretched his hand towards me. "Come tread the maze with me."

It would have been so easy to take his hand and do just that. But overriding my desire to be with him, to take this as just another lark, was the fearful, wordless conviction that there was danger here. And if I refused to join him, perhaps he would give up the idea and come away with me. He might sulk in the car, but he would get over it, and at least we would be away.

"Let's go now," I said, my arms stiff at my side.

Displeasure clouded his face, and he turned away from me with a shrug. "Give me just a minute, then," he said. And as I watched, he began to tread the maze.

He didn't attempt that curious, skipping dance we had seen the others do the night before; he simply walked, and none too quickly, with a careful, measured step. He didn't look at me as he walked, although the pattern of the maze brought him circling around again and again to face in my direction — he kept his gaze on the ground. I felt, as I watched, that he was being drawn further away from me with every step. I wrapped my arms around myself and told myself not to be a fool. I could feel the little hairs standing up all along my arms and back, and I had to fight the urge to break and run like hell. I felt, too, as if someone watched us, but when I looked around, the field was as empty as ever.

Phil had stopped, and I assumed he had reached the center. He stood very still and gazed off into the distance, his profile towards me. I remembered the man I had seen standing in the field — perhaps in that very spot, the center of the maze — when we had first arrived at the Old Vicarage.

Then, breaking the spell, Phil came bounding towards me, cutting across the path of the maze, and caught me in a bear hug. "Not mad?"

I relaxed a little. It was over, and all was well. I managed a small laugh. "No, of course not."

"Good. Let's go, then. Phil's had his little treat."

We walked arm in arm back towards the road. We didn't mention it again.

***

In the months to come those golden days, the two weeks we had spent wandering around southwest England, often came to mind. Those thoughts were an antidote to more recent memories: to those last days in the hospital, with Phil in pain, and then Phil dead.

I moved back to the States — it was home, after all, where my family and most of my friends lived. I had lived in England for less than two years, and without Phil there was little reason to stay. I found an apartment in the neighborhood where I had lived just after college, and got a job teaching, and, although painfully and rustily, began to go through the motions of making a new life for myself. I didn't stop missing Phil, and the pain grew no less with the passage of time, but I adjusted to it. I was coping.

In the spring of my second year alone I began to think of going back to England. In June I went for a vacation, planning to spend a week in London, a few days in Cambridge with Phil's sister, and a few days visiting friends in St. Ives. When I left London in a rented car and headed for St. Ives, I did not plan to retrace the well-remembered route of that last vacation, but that is what I found myself doing, with each town and village a bittersweet experience, recalling pleasant memories and prodding the deep sadness in me wider awake.

I lingered in Glastonbury, wandering the peaceful Abbey ruins and re-

membering Phil's funny, disrespectful remarks about the sacred thorn and King Arthur's bones. I looked for, but could not find, the cafe where we'd had dinner, and settled for fish and chips. Driving out of Glastonbury with the sun setting, I came upon the Old Vicarage and pulled into that familiar drive. There were more cars there, and the house was almost full up this time. There was a room available, but not the one I had hoped for. Although a part of me, steeped in sadness, was beginning to regret this obsessional pilgrimage, another part of me longed for the same room, the same bed, the same view from the same window, in order to conjure Phil's ghost. Instead, I was given a much smaller room on the other side of the house.

I retired early, skipping tea with the other guests, but sleep would not come. When I closed my eyes I could see Phil, sitting on the window ledge with a cigarette in one hand, narrowing his eyes to look at me through the smoke. But when I opened my eyes it was the wrong room, with a window too small to sit in, a room Phil had never seen. The narrowness of the bed made it impossible to imagine that he slept beside me still. I wished I had gone straight to St. Ives instead of dawdling and stopping along the way — this was pure torture. I couldn't recapture the past — every moment that I spent here reminded me of how utterly Phil was gone.

Finally I got up and pulled on a sweater and a pair of jeans. The moon was full, lighting the night, but my watch had stopped and I had no idea what time it was. The big old house was silent. I left by the front door, hoping that no one would come along after me to relock the door. A walk in the fresh air might tire me enough to let me sleep, I thought.

I walked along the gravel drive, past all the parked cars, towards the road, and entered the next field by the same gate that Phil and I had used in daylight in another lifetime. I scarcely thought of where I was going, or why, as I made my way to the turf-maze which had fascinated Phil and frightened me. More than once I had regretted not taking Phil's hand and treading the maze with him when he had asked. Not that it would have made any difference in the long run, but all the less-than-perfect moments of our time together had returned to haunt me and given rise to regrets since Phil's death — all the opportunities missed, now gone forever; all the things I should have said or done or done differently.

There was someone standing in the field. I stopped short, staring, my heart pounding. Someone standing there, where the center of the maze must be. He was turned away, and I could not tell who he was, but something about the way he stood made me certain that I had seen him before, that I knew him.

I ran forward and — I must have blinked — suddenly the figure was gone again, if he had ever existed. The

moonlight was deceptive, and the tall grass swaying in the wind, and the swiftly moving clouds overhead cast strange shadows.

"Come tread the maze with me."

Had I heard those words, or merely remembered them?

I looked down at my feet and then around, confused. Was I standing in the maze already? I took a tentative step forward and back, and it did seem that I was standing in a shallow depression. The memory flooded back: Phil standing in the sunlit field, rocking back and forth and saying "I think this is it." The open, intense look on his face.

"Phil," I whispered, my eyes filling with tears.

Through the tears I saw some motion, but when I blinked them away, again there was nothing. I looked around the dark, empty field, and began to walk the path laid out long before. I did not walk as slowly as Phil had done, but more quickly, almost skipping, hitting the sides of the maze path with my feet to be certain of keeping to it, since I could not see it.

And as I walked, it seemed to me that I was not alone, that people were moving ahead of me, somehow just out of my sight (beyond another turn in the winding path I might catch them up), or behind. I could hear their footsteps. the thought that others were behind me, following me, unnerved me, and I stopped and turned around to look. I saw no one, but I was now facing in the direction of the Old Vicarage, and my gaze went on to the house. I could see the upper window, the very window where Phil and I had stood together looking out, the point from which we had seen the dancers in the maze.

The curtains were not drawn across that dark square of glass this night, either. And as I watched, a figure appeared at the window. A tall shape, a pale face looking out. And after a moment, as I still stared, confused, a second figure joined the first. Someone smaller — a woman. The man put his arm around her. I could see — perhaps I shouldn't have been able to see this at such a distance, with no light on in the room — but I could see that the man was wearing a sweater, and the woman was naked. And I could see the man's face. It was Phil. And the woman was me.

There we were. Still together, still safe from what time would bring. I could almost feel the chill that had shaken me then, and the comfort of Phil's protecting arm. And yet I was not there. Not now. Now I was out in the field, alone, a premonition to my earlier self.

I felt someone come up beside me. Something as thin and light and hard as a bird's claw took hold of my arm. Slowly I turned away from the window and turned to see who held me. A young man was standing beside me, smiling at me. I thought I recognized him.

"He's waiting for you at the center," he said. "You mustn't stop now."

Into my mind came a vivid picture of Phil in daylight, standing still in the center of the maze, caught there by something, standing there forever. Time was not the same in the maze, and Phil could still be standing where he had once stood. I could be with him again, for a moment or forever.

I resumed the weaving, skipping steps of the dance with my new companion. I was eager now, impatient to reach the center. Ahead of me I could see other figures, dim and shifting as the moonlight, winking in and out of view as they trod the maze on other nights, in other centuries.

The view from the corner of my eyes was more disturbing. I caught fleeting glimpses of my partner in this dance, and he did not look the same as when I had seen him face to face. He had looked so young, and yet that light, hard grasp on my arm did not seem that of a young man's hand.

A hand like a bird's claw....

My eyes glanced down my side to my arm. The hand lying lightly on my solid flesh was nothing but bones, the flesh all rotted and dropped away years before. Those peripheral, sideways glimpses I'd had of my dancing partner were the truth — sights of something long dead and yet still animate.

I stopped short and pulled my arm away from that horror. I closed my eyes, afraid to turn to face it. I heard the rustle and clatter of dry bones. I felt a cold wind against my face and smelled something rotten. A voice — it might have been Phil's — whispered my name in sorrow and fear.

What waited for me at the center? And what would I become, and for how long would I be trapped in this monotonous dance if ever I reached the end?

I turned around blindly, seeking the way out. I opened my eyes and began to move, then checked myself — some strong, instinctual aversion kept me from cutting across the maze paths and leaping them as if they were only so many shallow, meaningless furrows. Instead, I turned around (I glimpsed pale figures watching me, flickering in my peripheral vision) and began to run back the way I had come, following the course of the maze backward, away from the center, back out into the world alone.

This entertaining and not entirely serious extrapolation of a problem in university scheduling comes to us from a new writer who describes himself as a "short, balding, overworked associate professor of mathematics at a state university in Florida." Mr. Taylor also assures us that the Banach-Tarski paradox is an honest-to-goodness theorem in mathematics.

Plenty of Nothing

BY

MICHAEL D. TAYLOR

Aloysius Hagmeister, dean of the university's largest college, has been widely credited with the proportions, the musculature, and the temperament of a bull with hemorrhoids. Even full professors have been known to blanch when summoned to his office. Several portraits with an aura of the eighteenth century and earlier hang in that large and awesome office, and Perceveal in history once told me he was convinced one was of Torquemada and another of Captain Bligh. No one, so far as I know, has ever asked Hagmeister the truth of the matter.

It should be understood that the dean is not merely a vivid personality but of considerable importance in his official capacity as well. His office has charge of Arts and Sciences, graduate education, research, and university parking lots and thus controls huge amounts of money. Many faculty members feel he is second in power only to President Twertwell. Some feel that by force of personality he is first. I don't know if they mean his personality or Twertwell's.

Hopkins is an altogether different matter. The man reminds me of nothing so much as a beach ball. A middle-aged beach ball with a balding head and pipestem arms and legs. Add to that picture a perpetually smoldering cigar and an unshakable ignorance of the very concept of an ashtray, and you have the outward Hopkins.

I'm sorry to say his colleagues think him outrageous and less than credible. They've heard too many anecdotes from him which eventually reach the line, "...so I said to von Neumann, 'Look, Johnny, here's the error in your calculations....'" It's a shame they feel that way because Hopkins really is a scholar. The mathematical world is

still agog over his masterly translation of the first five volumes of Bourbaki into Old Norse, a process terminated only by his publishers' discovery that speakers of Old Norse who are interested in advanced mathematics are quite scarce. And his researches in the subject of irreducibly fuzzy sets are so esoteric that the only people in the world believed to completely understand them are the members of a small band of Romanian specialists in fuzzy set theory. Unfortunately their response in published articles to Hopkins' work is such that no one is quite sure whether they agree with him, disagree with him, or even understand English.

Instinctively one feels that men such as Hagmeister and Hopkins should never be brought together, that no good could come of such a meeting. And providence has arranged that in the natural course of events they never *would* be brought together. Hopkins would lecture and Hagmeister would administer and niether would have any reason to bother the other. They might, to be sure, catch distant glimpses of one another at graduations or all-faculty gatherings, but that would be as meaningful as a polar bear and a python eyeing one another from different cages at a zoo.

Every once in a while, though, there is a lapse in the natural order of things. And the consequences of such a lapse.... Well, the consequences can be strange.

Years of lecturing have helped me develop a fine sense of timing. So when the bell rang for the end of class, I was standing a foot from the door and was just writing the last word of a sentence on the blackboard. Smoothly, without a moment's pause, I called, "See you tomorrow," over my shoulder and was out like a shot. I knew from sad experience that to linger was to be penned down for half an hour by a dozen students, each with a problem that would "take only a minute." Under my arm was a twenty-pound mass of take-home exams. Its bulk was rich with a promise of long, dreary hours of grading.

This next hour was free, but the one after it was an office hour. I shuddered. Students would be stacked up at least six deep outside my door at every instant of that office hour. Of course it was only natural. Couldn't blame the students. They needed and deserved help. If only there weren't so many of them and so few of me.

I stopped by the departmental office, and Irene, one of the secretaries, said, "Did you hear what happened to Dr. Hopkins this morning? You know how poky the elevator is. Well, it broke down for an hour with him in it. That wouldn't have been so bad if the only other person in it with him hadn't turned out to be Dean Hagmeister."

"Poor Hopkins!" I said with a laugh.

"He was white as a sheet when they got him out. Dr. Hopkins, I mean. It

didn't bother the dean any."

"I'll look in on Hopkins," I said. "That must have been a trying experience."

I like to visit Hopkins' office. When visitors comment on the mess in my office, I just lead them down the hall to Hopkins' lair where books and papers perch on the desk in shaky imitation of the Himalayas and the desk calendar is three years out of date. The cleaning lady comes in once a week to vacuum up the ring of cigar ash around Hopkins' chair and otherwise avoids the place. I like the contrast.

I found that Hopkins still didn't look himself.

"Like being locked in a cage with a tiger, eh?"

"Marcos, don't joke. Something ghastly has happened."

"Uh-oh. Something bad between you and Hagmeister?"

"Not so far as he's concerned. He has a monkey off his back, and now it's on mine. You know this scheduling problem?"

"What scheduling problem?"

"Good heavens! Don't you read the student newspaper?"

"Not if I can help it. I have too much respect for the English language.

"Well, try to overcome your squeamishness for a moment and glance at this."

Hopkins glared at me and passed over a copy of *The Student Screech*. The headline read: "University Makes Deal with Oil Country. Fifteen Hundred New Students Next Year." I gathered from the first paragraph that the university was supposed to educate all the college-age students of some obscure sheikdom which had just struck it lucky in the petroleum game.

"Fifteen hundred?" I said. "Where will we put them? Who'll teach them?"

"Oh, its clear enough who will teach them," replied Hopkins. "We will. The same people as before. Somewhere in that article Twertwell points out that this fifteen hundred amounts to an average increase of only 5.6 students per class. No trouble there."

"Did he actually make a remark like that? In public?"

"Sure. Want me to find it?"

"No. I prefer to believe it never happened."

"Sorry, Marcos. Anyway, let's come back to your other question. Where do we put them. Look at the next page."

There was an article which said that due to the unparalleled complexity of class scheduling that the university would face next year, scheduling would be handled directly by the administration instead of the department chairmen.

"What am I supposed to make of that?" I asked.

"Desperation. It has dawned on the administration that they may at last have reched the point of trying to put a pint in a half-pint bottle. Their greed for warm bodies has finally landed them in trouble. They haven't any

more idea where to cram this load of foreign students than you do. I knew it as soon as I read the paper."

"Sounds like an awful mess, but what does it have to do with you and Hagmeister?"

"Well, when Hagmeister and I found ourselves stranded in the elevator, I started talking to pass the time. You know how it is, Marcos. I get to rattling on, and sometimes things come out I know I shouldn't say, only I've already said them. Anyway, I started talking about how this scheduling problem needed advanced mathematical knowledge and lots of computer time. Terms like 'optimization theory,' 'combinatorics,' and 'packing problem' fell like snow from the sky. I wish I had recorded what I said. The interplay of words and ideas was simply brilliant. I could tell Hagmeister was impressed. He never said a word, just stared at me in fascination."

"Didn't it strike you as rash? I mean you telling him his business?"

"Not at the time. I was enthralled by my own performance. And everything went well till I got through. Then Hagmeister shook my hand and informed me I was head of the new University Scheduling Committee."

"He what?"

"He gave me his monkey. I talked so convincingly about how to solve his problem, he gave me the problem."

"Hopkins, that *is* ghastly. Why didn't you turn him down? You don't have the time."

"I was going to. I had just got over my surprise and it was on the tip of my tongue to refuse when Hagmeister mentioned he had noticed I was up for promotion. He passes on all promotions in Arts and Sciences, you know. He said it would look nice on my record if I solved this problem."

"Oh, wow. You're stuck."

"And how."

We sat in gloomy silence for a moment; then Hopkins straightened up and stuck out his cigar at a defiant angle.

"If I have to do it, I'll do it. Fortunately, I won't have to do it all by myself."

"What does that mean?"

"I told Hagmeister I couldn't do it alone. I'd need help." Hopkins was looking at me in a peculiar way. "So he said pick someone out and he'd see that both of us would have release time and computer time."

"Hopkins, no."

"Aw, Marcos, don't be—"

"Absolutely not."

"I wouldn't pick just anyone. Only a person whose abilities I respect. And think how nice this would look on your record when *you* are up for promotion."

"Pick someone else."

"For crying out— Well, if you're going to be like that, I guess I'll have to. Who can I ... Oh. Yeah. I'll get Toggleson."

"Toggleson? Good grief, why him? I would think you'd want somebody

who knows something about operations research or packing problems."

"There's no one around here like that. Besides, who are you to object? You refuse to serve."

"I know, I know. Still, he has a reputation for being weird. Even among the other physicists. And I don't believe I've ever understood one word the man says. I don't know if he mumbles or if the words get lost in all that hair growing on his face."

"He does not mumble. He speaks perfectly clearly. You just have to listen closely. Don't worry, Marcos. I know Toggleson and he's dependable. That's what I want, someone I can depend on. He's also a marvelous programmer. Best of all, he's up for promotion too."

An unpleasant idea occurred to me, and I said, "Did you ever stop to think what will happen to you if you can't solve this problem?"

"Huh?"

"There are people to whom Hagmeister answers. Regents, legislators, even the president. If you can't find the solution the dean needs, he can try to get off the hook by offering them your head. *You* will be the one who failed, not Hagmeister."

"You think he would do that? Boy. Sure he would. He probably had it in mind when he handed me the monkey."

"Very likely. What are you going to do about it?"

"Do? There's only one thing I can do. Push that phone over here. I'm going to phone Toggleson and get this committee on the road."

For a while after this, I lost track of what Hopkins was up to. To be sure, I often saw him on the way to class; his office is just down the hall from mine. But all his spare time was spent with Toggleson somewhere away from the department working on their project. I did notice that he staggered a little more than usual on his way to early morning classes.

Then one day at lunchtime I ran across Hopkins and Toggleson sitting at a table in the faculty club. I was struck by their haggard faces and wrinkled clothes. They were almost finished with their meal, but I sat down anyway and ordered.

"You don't look happy," I said after the waitress left.

Neither one of them said anything for a while; then Hopkins took his cigar from his mouth and said in sepulchral tones, "We're doomed men, Marcos, doomed."

"Surely it can't be that bad! Is it this scheduling project?"

"Gerlaitissvissz!" Toggleson suddenly proclaimed. "Agglummp herrummmk!"

I watched him in fascination. It was incredible the way hair grew down over his face. I felt I was listening to an animated mop.

Hopkins nodded. "That's a good

way to put it," he said.

"Er — very expressive," I said, "but couldn't you be a little more detailed?"

"Detailed? Detail is one of the things that's about to do us in. You can't begin to imagine — Just think for a moment about those details. So many labs here for dissection of guppies, so many sections there on Elizabethan allegories. Old whatchamacallit can't be persuaded to teach anything other than Attic Greek, and young whoozhisface will only teach classes from eight till ten in the morning. Classes on Chinese musical theory absolutely cannot be held next door to the audio lab,and the average teaching load in the floral architecture department *has* come out to 11.25 hours. On and on it goes. It's endless. Unbelievable."

"Whoa. I thought the computer was going to handle all that detail."

"So did I. Part of the trouble is each detail seems to require a new program all its own. Another part of the trouble is we no sooner get a program set up than someone comes along and changes the problem. For instance, Toggleson and I just spent three days figuring out how to work a course on the physiology of gerbils into the schedule. A required course, so we had to do it, but with funny lab and lecture requirements that made it awkward as the devil to fit in. And what do you think happened yesterday? It was changed from a three-hour to a four-hour course! That's what happened! All those calculcations—"

"Grmmk," Toggleson interrupted in sad tones. As an afterthought he added, "Herrrp."

"You're darn right it is," said Hopkins. "Anyway, Marcos, I'm starting to think the problem's unmanageable. What is it they say in Frankenstein movies? 'There are limits beyond which man may not go.' I think we've found one of those limits. Trying to schedule the mob of students we'll face next fall into the space we have now — it's an unnatural act. All I have to do is explain that to Hagmeister. That's all. I'm starting to have nightmares in which a small, fanged thing with his face comes and squats on my chest and leers at me."

I tried to say something to cheer Hopkins up, but at that moment the waitress brought my order. She had just left when Toggleson stood up. "Hremming skurrrpp," he announced and left with his bill.

"Doesn't it seem to you," I said, "that he has just a trace of accent?"

"Maybe it's those two years he spent in England."

"Oh? Then what did he say?"

"Oh, come on. He wanted to check a new idea about how to schedule Gruesome Grogan's course."

"Whose course?"

"That's what the students call him. The course has something to do with the deformation of materials, and the engineers won't let anyone else teach—"

Hopkins stopped as abruptly as a ship striking an underwater reef. His eyes glazed, and I thought his cigar might drop from his mouth.

"Hopkins? You all right?"

For a moment there was no response. Then his mouth tightened on his cigar, and he began to come back to life.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Just had an idea."

"Must have been a good one."

"Good and crazy. Listen, Marcos, I have to go check something out. Hope you don't mind."

"Course not. See you around."

As Hopkins left, I wondered, what the dickens was that all about?

I found out a month later.

One afternoon as I was working in my office, a voice suddenly shattered my concentration and yanked me rudely up from the depths of *The Journal of Non-applicable Algebra.*

"Tell me, Marcos, have you ever heard of the Banach-Tarski paradox?" There stood Hopkins in the open door leaning against the jamb and casually flicking cigar ash on my carpet. He had a box under one arm.

"Uh, no, can't say that I have. What is it?"

Hopkins strutted into the office and seized a piece of chalk at the board. A deft movement produced a sloppy circle. "Behold: a solid ball of radius one. According to Banach and Tarski, I can cut that ball into a finite number of pieces" —here he drew a number of nondescript doodles evidently meant to be fragments of the ball— "and reassemble the pieces in such a way as to form a solid ball of radius *two*." He capped his statement with a bigger sloppy circle.

My first reaction was that I had missed something. "Wait a minute. Are the balls made of rubber or something similar? Can I stretch the pieces? Expand them?"

Hopkins moved a pile of journals from a chair and sat down. "No," he said, "absolutely not." He planted his feet on my desk and leaned his chair back on two legs. "Better think of them as made of wood. You cut the first ball apart and move the pieces around just like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Only when you get through, you have a larger ball than before. A solid ball." He blew smoke toward the portrait of Gauss which frowns from one wall.

It occurred to me that Hopkins was suffering a mental breakdown caused by the pressure of trying to solve Hagmeister's problem and was displaying symptoms of a peculiarly mathematical sort.

"What you're saying doesn't make sense," I told him.

Hopkins took his feet from the desk and pulled a rumpled journal from a back pocket. "The original result was published in 1924, but here's a recent article about it in the *Monthly*. Right there. First article. See for yourself."

I didn't read the whole thing, just

the first page. It didn't say quite what Hopkins had claimed. Really it said something much worse. Banach and Tarski had proved that given almost any set X in euclidean space (think of that as being the ordinary three-dimensional space we live in), it could be chopped into a finite number of pieces and the pieces put together so as to make virtually any other set Y. There were some technical restrictions on X and Y, but these weren't serious. It followed that one ought to be able to take a ball bearing apart and reassemble the pieces into a full scale model of a Cadillac.

"How in the world did they ever get a result like that?" I said in awe.

Hopkins smiled. "It's the axiom of choice that does it. It makes it possible to chop that ball into pieces so weird it doesn't make sense to talk about their volumes. None of them *has* a volume anymore, not even volume zero."

"The axiom of choice. Ah-ha. That's a pure existence principle. No way in the world that can be used in any but a theoretical sense. You had me going for a moment. I thought you could actually carry out the operations on the ball. Physically, I mean."

Hopkins didn't answer. Instead he opened the box he held and tipped something out on the desk. A yellow ball and a red ball ran out and came to rest in a valley between a pile of exam papers and a couple of textbooks. The yellow one was certainly a billiard ball, and the red one looked like a billiard ball except for being too big. Its diameter was perhaps an inch greater than that of the other ball.

"What is this?" I said. "A joke?"

Hopkins carefully blew a smoke ring, then said, "An hour ago, they were the same size."

I picked the balls up and looked at them. "Are you saying what I think you are?" I asked.

"You don't have class for an hour," said Hopkins. "How'd you like to see a lab demonstration?"

"A lab demonstration?"

"Yep. You just come with me."

Our path led halfway across campus to a laboratory in the basement of Dirac Hall. In response to Hopkins' knocking, the door opened a crack and an eye peered out. Toggleson.

As he let us in, I glanced around the laboratory. Spools of wire, a couple of soldering guns, oscilloscopes, printed circuits, and lots of stuff I couldn't name were scattered around on benches, tables, and the floor in remarkably haphazard fashion. I decided this room must be for faculty use only; no one could teach a class in this chaos. In the center of the room was a machine about the size and shape of a refrigerator. A profusion of stiff wires which endlesly branched and rebranched sprang from one side of the machine. Antennas? The wires were pointed at a table which shared the center of the floor with the machine, and the top of

the table held scraps of wire and tin and a number of — billiard balls.

"Grmzzzk!" said Toggleson.

"Fine," said Hopkins. "You take care of that while I fill Marcos in on the details."

Toggleson went back to the machine in the center of the floor to do whatever it is mad scientists do with their progeny.

"Marcos, you are looking at History," said Hopkins. I could hear the capital letter. "That is the world's first Banach-Tarski field generator." He pointed at the "refrigerator."

"Is that what you used to expand the billiard ball?"

"Yes, but let me give you all the facts in proper order. About a year ago, Toggleson came to me in a state of great excitement. He had just run across a statement of the Banach-Tarski theorem, and it had occurred to him that if a way could be found to apply the theorem, one could take a given volume of any substance and increase it. Imagine doubling a given amount of gold or petroleum! Well, I looked into the thing for him and found two problems. One was the difficulty of getting a grip on a pure existence principle such as the axiom of choice. The other was that hadrons, an important class of subatomic particles, are believed to be point-like, and for technical reasons the Banach-Tarski effect would not apply to them. Conclusion: Banach-Tarski could not be used to increase a given amount of mass. A good thing too. Otherwise we might have a violation of mass-energy conservation, and *that* would throw physics into a cocked hat. Toggleson and I gave the idea up and turned to other things."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You showed me an oversize billiard ball in my office and claimed it used to be normal. How does that square with saying you can't increase a given mass?"

"Peace. I'm coming to that."

Hopkins puffed silently on his cigar for a moment, then went on.

"Remember that day you talked with Toggleson and me at the faculty club? I mentioned some sort of engineering course that has to do with stretching and bending things. While talking, a picture popped into my head of a room being stretched to larger size as though made of rubber. Suddenly I realized that although the Banach-Tarski effect could not be applied to matter, it could be applied to space!"

"Huh?"

"You know, space. The three-dimensional stuff we move around in. *Space*. Anyway, as soon as I got that far, I hunted up Toggleson and told him my idea. To cut a long story short, some ingenious applications of Robinson's nonstandard analysis took care of the difficulty with the axiom of choice and allowed us to reduce the mathematics to physics. Today was our first real test. I shouldn't wonder if it ranked with the initiation of the first

self-sustaining chain reaction."

Hopkins brought out his oversize billiard ball and gazed at it lovingly. "If you examine this carefully, Marcos, you'll find it has the same mass as a normal billiard ball. What we did was increase the amount of space it occupied; in effect we spread the molecules farther apart, made the ball less dense. And we're going to use the same effect to solve the dean's scheduling problem."

"That stretchable room you thought about...."

"Yes. All we have to do is take a room and increase the space in it. That means it will hold more students. Increase the space enough and — presto! Instant auditorium! Do that with five or six rooms, and Hagmeister will have all the space he needs."

At that moment Toggleson signaled everything was ready. So we went over and looked at the table. An X an inch high had been painted on it, and Hopkins placed a purple billiard ball there on top of a stand made from a small piece of wire.

We moved back a pace, and Toggleson punched a button. The machine beside the table hummed to life. In a region just over the tabletop, with the billiard ball at its heart, the air curdled. It made me think of a glass sphere my mother used to own and the way it distorted things seen in and through it. It was as though the billiard ball was embedded in a crystal ball with invisible edges.

Hopkins stepped to the table and gingerly pulled the ball from the midst of the distortion.

"Hey, is it safe to stick your hand in there?"

"Sure. The amount of space my hand occupies remains exactly the same as it passes in and out of the field. Now if my hand were in the field as it was turned on or off, then I'd be in trouble. But this way it's okay."

As Hopkins talked, he brought the ball to me. It was bigger than before. Distinctly bigger.

"There's no need to swear," Hopkins reproved. I hadn't even realized what I was saying. "I take it you're impressed."

"Impressed? I'm pulverized!"

Hopkins laughed. "Didn't mean to destroy you. Anyway, the show's over. This is the only trick we're doing today."

When I left, Hopkins was cheerfully writing down a table of contents for a projected book on engineering applications on the axiom of choice while Toggleson smilingly probed the innards of his infernal device. I taught in a daze that day, but I doubt the students noticed any difference.

Next day the disquieting news swept across campus that Dean Hagmeister had been seen coming out of his office with his arms around Hopkins' and Toggleson's shoulders and smiling broadly. It was disquieting because the last time he had been seen in

such good spirits with a faculty member, a white-haired sage of sixty-four years, he had just discovered that his companion had been improperly hired thirty-five years before and wasn't entitled to either tenure or pension.

No one could get a word from Hopkins or Toggleson as to why the dean was so cheerful. I was the only outsider in the know. I kept mum on my favored status, and Hopkins kept me up to date on all Banach-Tarski developments.

"We'll knock 'em dead when we announce it!" he told me. "There'll be a special demonstration for the university administration and some important state legislators. We'll have newsmen there too, and that's when we'll go public. Till then, Hagmeister wants everything under wraps."

A few days later the rumor was out that guards had been posted at one of the geodesic domes near the gymnasium. The dómes had been in use as temporary classrooms. Now it was observed that no one was permitted in except Hopkins and Toggleson and some workmen. These people were frequently seen coming and going and carrying equipment into the dome. Hopkins confirmed to me that the demonstration would be held there.

"We've stripped the original machine for parts and are working on a much bigger field generator," he said. "This time we want to expand not just a billiard ball but the whole inside of a room."

Naturally it was exciting to be "in" on such an important secret, but after a while Hopkins attitude began to wear on me.

"You know," he said, "I've begun to think. Once it becomes known what we've done here, it wouldn't surprise me if the Institute for Advanced Study were willing to set up a special permanent position for me. Not that I want to be too firmly tied down. No, there's a lot to be said for the traveling life. A series of lectures for a few months at Berkeley ought to be just right. Then perhaps a year at Oxford. Probably couldn't get the full flavor of England in less than a year. Then perhaps some prestigious French university. What would be a good French university, Marcos?"

"You're getting cigar ash on my desk," I said resignedly.

"How about the Sorbonne? Then northward into Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Say! That reminds me. What's the nomination procedure for a Nobel Prize?"

Bubbles are born to burst, and Hopkins' ego was a bubble if ever I had seen one. I never consciously thought it out, but somehow I knew that. But I never anticipated, not even subconsciously, that his bursting would have ominous implications for all the faculty.

I ran across him sitting all alone in the faculty lounge a few days before the scheduled demonstration. He looked like a beach ball whose air has leak-

ed out. Even his cigar drooped.

"It's ghastly, Marcos," he sighed, "just ghastly."

"What's ghastly?" I sat down with him.

"Hagmeister's plans. I should have suspected something like this, but I was blind. Just an innocent — that's me!"

"Ha, so the dean has sinister intentions. That doesn't surprise me. As a matter of fact, it restores my faith in human nature. Go on. Let's hear the rest."

"Well, I was sitting in his office talking with him. He was in a mellow mood — what counts as mellow for Hagmeister — and started talking about the points he wants to make at the speech he'll give during the demonstration. I'm afraid that official speeches, whether being given or being planned, have a stupefying effect on me. I can't remember anything coherent till I came to and heard him say that the guiding principle of university administration is to maximize the university's throughput."

"What the dickens is *throughput*?"

"I asked him. He told me throughput meant the students who were being processed by the university."

"Processed. And here I thought we were teaching them. Sorry I asked. Go on."

"Hagmeister went on to tell me that when Toggleson and I came to hjim with the Banach-Tarski field generator, there had been suddenly revealed to him a marvelous way to increase the university's throughput. By using the Banach-Tarski effect, every classroom on campus could be doubled in size! Every faculty member would suddenly find himself provided with the means of accommodating *twice* as many students as before!"

"Are you serious?" I asked.

Hopkins nodded wearily.

"That's—" Words failed me. I thought of classes already so large that I had no hope of treating the students as individuals. I thought of papers sitting on my desk waiting to be graded. A sea of papers. An infinity of papers. *Double* that?

"Does he think the faculty will sit still for that?" I said.

"They might. Jobs are scarce and so are raises to meet inflation."

I tried to think of an objection that would make sense to Hagmeister. It wouldn't do any good to point out that sea of papers to him; so far as he was concerned, that was only an indication of how well we were doing.

"Look," I said, "doubling the school's capacity doesn't automatically double its students. Where do the extra warm bodies come from? I know Hagmeister set up this special deal to educate students from some oil country, but that still leaves a lot of room to fill."

"According to the dean, there are hordes of students who are kept out of the university by nothing but technicalities. All he has to do is work out a

legal way to give credit for arithmetic and spelling, and the problem's solved."

I began to have this horrible feeling of being a rat in a trap. It didn't help to know I was going to have the rest of the faculty as company.

"Hopkins," I said, "you'll have to change the dean's mind."

"Me?" He seemed completely surprised. "What can I do?"

"If nothing else, you could assassinate him. Wait. Here's an idea. Tell him the machine doesn't work right. Tell him you have to tinker with it. Stall. You can get Toggleson to go along with that, can't you?"

"Sure. He's as upset as I am. But it won't work. We turned the machine on yesterday. It works beautifully, and Hagmeister knows it."

"How about blackmail? Tell him you and Toggleson won't work on the machine till he gives up this crazy idea of doubling everyone's classes. After all, he needs the Banach-Tarski machine to shoehorn in the foreign students."

"Marcos, this is Hagmeister you're talking about. If Toggleson and I try to tell him where to get off—" Hopkins gave a shudder.

It was hard to blame him. Rumor had it that Hagmeister knew a taxidermist who specialized in professors. Still, Hopkins and Toggleson were the only ones with any real chance of doing anything.

"You'll have to come up with something," I said. "When Hagmeister's scheme comes out followed by the news that you and Toggleson are the ones who made it possible, how do you think the rest of the faculty will feel?"

Hopkins' eyes widened. "You think they'll be mad at us ?"

"I think you'll be lucky if you're drawn and quartered."

Hopkins looked so woebegone I immediately regretted what I had said. It was true, though, and he needed to be made aware of it.

Hopkins got up with all the springiness of a man of eighty. "I don't know what I can do," he said, "but I'll think about it." Then he left.

In the next day or so it became common knowledge in the mathematics department that something was wrong with Hopkins. He didn't notice friends in the hall; he just walked past them with a look of misery on his face. He began to lose weight. One day he delivered a senior-level analysis lecture to a freshman calculus class, but disaster was averted when none of his students noticed any difference. Friends who saw him from a distance would sadly shake their heads and, as though pronouncing an epitaph, say, "His cigar has gone out."

At the same time, sketchy reports from a friend in physics let me know people were remarking on how nervous Toggleson had lately become. I

didn't see how anyone could tell under all that hair.

Hopkins started avoiding me. Partly, I think, from a sense of shame, and partly because he felt I would give him no sympathy. My feelings toward him and Toggleson were a curious blend of concern about their predicament and annoyance that they had ever invented the Banach-Tarski field generator.

Meanwhile campus curiosity about the enigmatic geodesic dome was growing to fever-pitch. Truck drivers imported from out of town brought truckload after truckload of dirt into the dome. They were often observed to emerge shaking their heads in evident bewilderment and amazement. When questioned as to what was in there, they always replied about like this: "I ain't supposed to tell. Besides, you wouldn't believe it." Of course the guards kept anyone from going into the dome to check further.

On the day of the demonstration, Hopkins came to my office wearing a new coat and tie and splendidly polished shoes. He himself looked quite haggard.

"This is it," he said. "The demonstration starts in about twenty minutes. I have to help Toggleson run the machine."

There was an awkward silence; then he said, "I guess there isn't any way to stop Hagmeister. Not after today. If he sells his idea to the legislators in the audience...."

"I know," I finished for him, "we're sunk."

A silence of mutual gloom enveloped us. Each of us stared at a wall rather than look at one another.

After a moment, some unaccountable impulse made me say, "Good luck." I meant it in some sort of vague, general way, not for the demonstration. So far as the demonstration went, I only hoped his equipment would fall apart.

Hopkins straightened up a little. "Thanks, Marcos." Then he was gone.

I went to work and tried to put Hopkins, Hagmeister, and the rest of the business out of my mind.

An hour later, when I was a third of the way through a particularly ghastly set of differential-equations exams, I heard a peculiar *thump!* It had the quality of a sound which is powerful but muted by distance, and through my chair and the floor I felt vibrations associated with it.

Puzzled, I stepped out of my office to see what I could learn and discovered other people popping into the hall with the same idea. Several of us went out of the building, swept our eyes over the nearby campus without discovering anything, and went back in. Just as I came inside, a campus policeman rushed out of the mathematics department office and ran past me. I trotted into the departmental office and asked, "What was that all about?"

The secretaries were talking excitedly to one another, but Doris, the

blonde one, broke off long enough to say, "You mean the policeman? He got a call over his walkie-talkie saying all campus police should report to the west side of the gym immediately. Some sort of an accident at the geodesic dome there."

None of them knew what sort of an accident it had been or if anyone had been hurt. So I decided to head for the dome myself. But as I stepped out of the departmental office, I noticed at the end of the hall a figure like a beach ball with pipestem arms and legs. He was putting a key into an office door. I dogtrotted to his side.

"Hopkins! What are you doing here? And what in the world has happened to you?" One hand was cut and there was a bruise on his cheek. His clothes were rumpled, and it looked as though someone had tried to remove his necktie without untying it. The eyes which he turned on me were dazed, empty.

'Oh, Hi, Marcos. I guess you mean this." He looked down at the necktie and fingered it. "That must have happened when Hagmeister tried to strangle me."

"When *what*?"

"Of course it's hard to blame him. I mean considering the circumstances. Luckily the police distracted him when they arrived. So I slipped off.

"But you know something, Marcos?" Hopkins suddenly brightened. "Hagmeister's scheme to double classes is dead. Sort of like when the *Hindenburg* crashed and everybody lost faith in dirigibles. It's unfortunate, but I think the same thing is going to happen to the Banach-Tarski effect."

"Hopkins, *what happened*?"

"Please, not so loud. My head hurts. I wish that senator hadn't hit me."

"Hopkins, I'll strangle you myself if you don't explain."

"All right, all right, I was coming to it. Let's go sit in my — no, make that your office. I'm not sure I should be seen now."

We went into my office, closed the door, and settled ourselves in chairs. Hopkins produced a cigar and lit it. "That's better," he said. After a puff or two, he started his story.

"Remember when I left here? I went right to the dome and found Toggleson and Hagmeister and most of our guests in place. Boy, were their eyes bugging out. The guests, I mean. Some of them kept walking in and out, in and out, Looking at the dome outside and then looking at it inside. They knew we had more chairs and people in that building than we had any right to, and the distortion in the air was driving them crazy. Just the sort of thing to send you running to an optometrist. Around the wall there was no distortion to speak of, but the farther in one went toward the center of the room, the worse it got.

"The stage was right in the middle of the dome. So when Hagmeister finally got up to speak, he looked a little

like a figure in a funhouse mirror. He was loud and surprisingly eloquent. He painted a rosy word-picture of classroom after classroom stuffed with incredible numbers of students and gleaming piles of money growing up in state coffers because of the savings effected. His audience was enthralled.

"While Hagmeister was casting his spell, Toggleson and I manned the Banach-Tarski device. It's physical setup was different from what you saw in the lab. The new gadget consisted of two separate units standing at diametrically opposite points along the inside wall, with Hagmeister and the audience between them. Toggleson had the master unit and I was at the secondary. The machines were humming, red and green lights were glowing, and things seemed to be going wonderfully well.

"Then Toggleson called to me to throw a certain switch. 'Throw the red switch,' he said. Later he tried to claim it was the yellow one he called for, but I heard red. Perfectly clearly. Anyway, I threw it. It was the cutoff for my unit, but I didn't know that till too late. I *told* Toggleson I couldn't keep all those buttons and switches straight. But the point is, my machine went off. That caused a power surge that knocked Toggleson's master unit for a loop and sent smoke curling out an access panel. The Banach-Tarski effect inside the dome broke down."

Hopkins seemed to run out of steam. He just sat looking at me pathetically.

'Wow, you did *that*? Wrecked his demonstration? I can see he might be mad. Still, it seems excessive to try to strangle you."

"There's worse to come and worse than worse," said Hopkins. "Listen. The total mass of air in the dome suddenly found itself occupying a much smaller building; air pressure in the dome made a huge, almost instantaneous jump upward. That might have been bad for the people inside except that the roof let go and threw pieces of dome all over the landscape."

"You mean the dome exploded?"

"In effect. Then the ground rose up."

"The ground?"

"Yeah. One of the reasons we chose the dome for our demonstration was because it was easy to take up the floor and get down to bare ground. When we turned on Toggleson's machine a few days ago, just as we had expected, there suddenly wasn't enough dirt to fill up the space from one side of the building to the other, and we found ourselves with a big pit in the middle of the floor. We trucked in some sand, packed it down, and had a nice new floor. But when the Banach-Tarski device went off, all that backfired on us. Suddenly we had too much dirt. Some of it compactified: instant cement. But that didn't take care of all the pressure; there was *still* too much dirt in too little space. So the middle of the floor instantly moved up two or three feet."

I whistled. "Anyone hurt?"

"Except for scrapes and bruises, I don't think so. A miracle. Hagmeister's stage was transformed into a catapult, but when he came down, I can assure you, he had the strength of a bull."

I shook my head in mingled amazement and sympathy. "Hopkins, this is a grade-A disaster you're describing. How in the world did you get into something like this?"

"Sheer rotten luck. And the fact that Toggleson occasionally slurs his words. He doesn't like me to mention the fact, but every once in a while, he does."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Maybe I should imitate Toggleson. Last time I saw him, he was planning to take an unpaid sabbatical to South America. Starting right that instant."

"Wait a minute. I can understand you might want to start checking salaries at the University of Patagonia, but you sound as though you're getting ready to flee a murder charge. Whatever is commonly believed, Hagmeister cannot have you shot at dawn."

"Marcos, you don't yet have the full picture. Remember our experiment with the billiard ball in Toggleson's lab? You asked if it was safe for me to stick my hand in and out of the Banach-Tarski field, and I said it was so long as my hand wasn't there when the field went on or off."

"Yes, I remember."

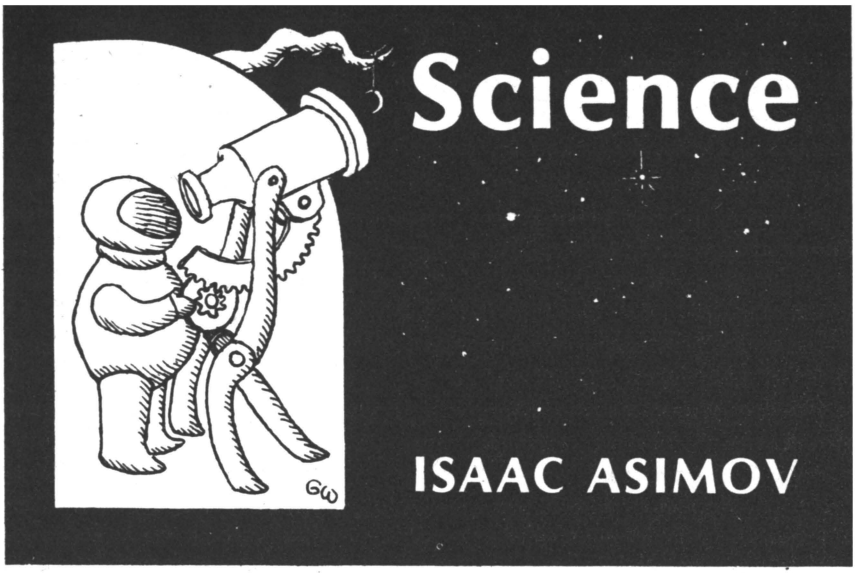
"Well, the people in the dome were inside such a field when it went off. Toggleson and I were right by the wall where the effect was almost nonexistent, and we weren't affected. Not that I can tell. But the others were. Hagmeister worst of all. And when Toggleson and I had to tell them the Banach-Tarski machines were wrecked and that it would take weeks to build new ones and reverse the effect — I guess that's what sent them out of control. That's when Hagmeister went for me."

"What do you mean?" I said. "What happened to them?" I had a sudden cold feeling that I knew what he was going to say.

Hopkins fixed me with his eye and spoke very deliberately.

"Marcos, we now have a dean who is three feet tall."

And he calmly blew himself a smoke ring.



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE CRUCIAL ASYMMETRY

On rare occasions I sit in a bar as a matter of social necessity, and a few nights ago such a necessity arose. I ordered my inevitable ginger ale and observed with scientific detachment (well, not quite) the beautiful bar-maid, whose long legs were covered by nothing more than sheer hose for their full length.

I was moved to philosophical reflection and said, out loud, what I have often thought.

"The rewards in male-female relationships," I said, "seem to be weighted enormously in favor of the male. Consider the female leg — how utterly smooth, graceful, well-proportioned and (I happen to know) delightful to the touch. What do women get in return for what they have to offer? The male leg: hairy, bunchy, and (I suspect) equally repulsive to sight and touch."

Whereupon a young lady, who was also at the table, said in wide-eyed wonder, "How can you possibly manage to get the situation so completely reversed?"

That left me speechless, I assure you, but as I lingered over my ginger-

ale, I worked it out in my mind. The natural attachment of men for the consummate charms of women, as contrasted with the bizarre affection women feel for men, is a necessary and even crucial asymmetry that preserves the human species.

It's tough on women, of course, but apparently that is how it must be.

And having straightened that out, let us move on to a crucial asymmetry in the Universe that is even more broadly significant.

The Universe is thought to be about 15,000,000,000 years old in the sense that 15,000,000,000 years ago there was a "big bang." With the big bang, the Universe came into existence as an object with its present mass but with a diameter that was virtually zero and a temperature that was virtually infinite.

With incredible rapidity, it expanded and cooled, continuing to do so at a steadily slowing rate. It continues to expand and cool today, 15,000,000,000 years later.

At the start, with mass and energy unbelievably concentrated, changes naturally took place very rapidly. They had to. For one thing, all change is driven by energy, and there never was such a concentrated energy supply in our Universe as existed at the very start. Secondly, change is made easier and more rapid if the constituent bits that are being subjected to change are close together so that they can interact without undue delay, and there never was such closeness in our Universe as existed at the very start.

As the Universe expanded, its constituent bits spread farther apart and the energy concentration (temperature) declined. For both reasons, the rate of change in the Universe slowed with expansion.

Because of the enormous rate of change at the start, physicists talk about crucial events that happened only minutes after the beginning, and only seconds after, and only very tiny fractions of a second after. Carefully, they calculate what must have happened in less than a billionth of a billionth of a second after the big bang.

This shakes the mind. How can so much happen in such an ultra-brief interval?

Ah, but let's not consider time as a smoothly and evenly flowing stream, with every second just as filled with potential events as every other second. Let us not consider all seconds as tiny bags of events of precisely the same size.

We are lured into thinking of seconds as equally-sized and equally-eventful right now, because the expansion-cooling of the Universe is now

proceeding at a rate so small compared to its present size and temperature that there is no perceptible change in the number of events a second can hold (on the average over the Universe generally) in a human lifetime or even in recorded history. There's not much change even over stretches of millions of years.

In the early beginnings of the Universe, however, seconds were incredibly crammed with events. An early second could hold trillions of times as many events as a contemporary second. A still earlier second could hold trillions of trillions of times as many events as a contemporary second. Judging by how many events they could hold, an early second was the equivalent of thousands of contemporary years in length, while a still earlier second was the equivalent of millions of contemporary years in length, and so on.

If we measure time by events, it would make more sense if we treat time logarithmically. Let us not suppose it behaves arithmetically, so that 1/15 of all the events that have ever taken place, took place in the first billion years; another 1/15 in the second billion years; another 1/15 in the third billion years; and so on, until the final 1/15 took place in the fifteenth billion years which brings us to now.

Let us suppose, instead, that half of all the events that took place in the Universe took place in the first 1/10 of the Universe's lifetime; that half of that half took place in the first 1/100 of the Universe's lifetime; that half of that half of that half took place in the first 1/1000 of the Universe's lifetime and so on. This is the logarithmic view.*

This means that half the events that have ever taken place in the Universe had taken place by 1,500,000,000 years after the big bang; a quarter of the events by 150,000,000 years after the big bang; an eighth of the events by 15,000,000 years after the big bang and so on.

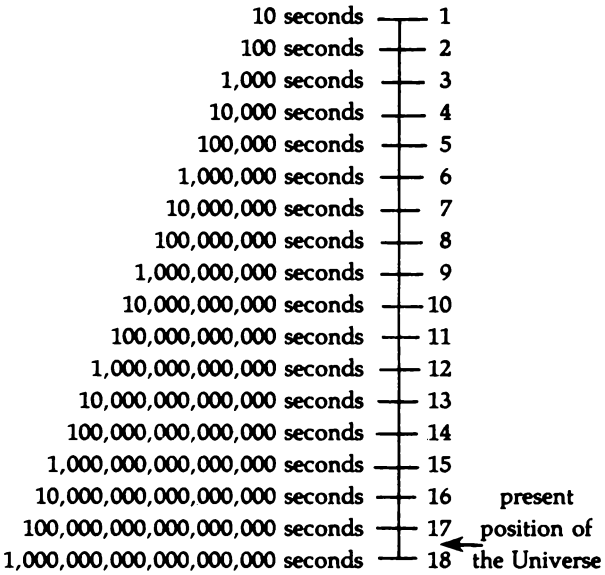
But let's not work with all those zeroes. Let's use exponential figures instead. In place of 15,000,000 000 years, we can say 1.5×10^{10} years, where 10^{10} is the product of ten ten's multiplied together, or a one followed by ten zeroes. Again, 1,500,000,000 years is 1.5×10^{7}; and so on. Now, we have exponents that go down smoothly from 10 to 9 to 8 and so on, and since exponents are very closely related to logarithms, this gives us a logarithmic scale.

** Matching events by halves to durations by tenths is just a matter of convenience in calculation. The actual match may be different, and more complicated, but I am just me and not a theoretical physicist.*

For convenience, in fact, let us consider the age of the Universe in seconds. Each year is made up of 31,556,926 seconds so that 15,000,000,000 years is just about 470,000,000,000,000,000 (or 470 quadrillion) seconds long. Exponentially, we can write it as 4.7×10^{17} seconds.

Let us set up a logarithmic scale of time by drawing a straight line divided into equal intervals marked 1, 2, 3, and so on up to 18, as in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Logarithmic Time



Point 1 would represent the time 10^1, or 10 seconds, after the big bang; point 2 would 10^2, or 100 seconds, after the big bang; point 3 would be 10^3, or 1,000 seconds, after the big bang; and so on up to point 18, which would be 10^{18} or 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 seconds after the big bang. The Universe at present is located at about point 17 2/3.

Each time interval on the line would seem to be ten times as long as the one immediately above it by ordinary arithmetic. Thus, the interval between 2 and 3 is the interval from 10 to 100, or 90 seconds; while the interval between 1 and 2 is the interval from 1 to 10, or 9 seconds.

In terms of the number of events that took place within them, however, each interval may be considered as long as every other. As many events took place between 1 second and 10 seconds after the big bang as took place in all the billions of years representing the stretch between points 17

and 18 (100,000,000,000,000,000 seconds and 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 seconds.)

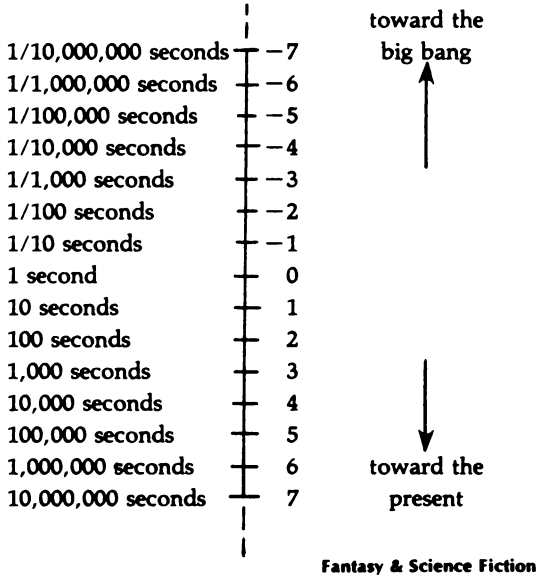
Yet need we begin the logarithmic line of Figure 1 at 1? Might we not extend it further upward to 0?

Certainly we can — and the first thought might be that 0 represents the big bang itself, but it doesn't!

The 0 on the line is not an ordinary zero but an exponential zero, representing 10^0 seconds, and 10^0 is *not* zero, though that might seem logical at a quick glance. Since 10^2 (100) is 1/10 of 10^3 (1000), and 10^1 (10) is 1/10 of 10^2 (100), then it is reasonable to suppose that 10^0 is 1/10 of 10^1 (10). But 1/10 of 10 is 1; therefore 10^0 should be equal to 1, and 0 on the logarithmic scale should represent 1 second.

We can extend the scale still further upward, and have −1, −2, −3 and so on, with each figure representing a point ten times closer to the big bang than the one before. Thus −1 represents the point one-tenth of a second after the big bang, −2 the point one-hundredth of a second after the big bang, −3 the point one-thousandth of a second after the big bang and so on (see Figure 2). From the stand point of the number of events taking place, each of these new tiny intervals is as long as any of the others. As many events took place between a thousandth of a second and a hundredth of a second, or between a thousand-millionth of a second and a hundred-millionth of a second after the big bang as took place in the last 13.5 billion years.

Figure 2 — Extended Logarithmic Time



If we imagine ourselves moving along the logarithmic time-line toward larger and larger numbers, the Universe is expanding and cooling. At 17-2/3, where the Universe is now located, it is about 25,000,000,000 light-years in diameter and has an average temperature of 3° K., that is, 3 degrees above absolute zero. (Of course, there are places where the temperature is much higher than that in today's Universe, even very much higher, as at the center of the Sun, but we're talking average.)

If we imagine ourselves moving along the logarithmic time-line toward smaller and smaller numbers, the Universe is contracting and warming. (From our present taken-for-granted view, it would be like taking a film of the Universe as it expands and cools and running it backward.)

Suppose, then, we run the film backward until the Universe reaches point 12. At that point, the Universe is 10^{12} seconds (or about 100,000 years) after the big bang. When the Universe is that young it has had time to expand to a diameter of only about 200,000 light-years. Its total width is not very much greater than the total width of a large galaxy of the contemporary Universe. The average temperature of this small universe is estimated to be about 1,000° K.

If we imagine the Universe to have contracted to this size, there is no longer room for galaxies, or even stars. The Universe is a mere chaos of atoms. In fact, if we try to trace the Universe back to points smaller than 12, it becomes too hot and too crowded for matter to exist even as atoms.

In short, it is only 100,000 years after the big bang that atoms formed and ordinary matter began to exist. It was only after a period of further expansion and cooling that the atoms could gather into stars and galaxies. Those atoms, stars and galaxies making up the Matter-Universe have existed for almost all the time of existence (considered arithmetically) of the Universe as a whole — 14.9 out of the 15 billion years. All those billions of years, however, take up only the last 5-2/3 intervals of the logarithmic time-line.

What existed at points lower than 12? What existed before the Matter-Universe?

When the Universe was too small and too hot to contain atoms, it must have been made up of the various sub-atomic constituents of atoms. It must have been a melange of photons, electrons, neutrons, protons and so on. Of these, the neutrons and protons make up the nuclei of normal atoms and are lumped together as "nucleons." They are the most massive particles at this stage and we can refer to the "Nucleon-Universe" as existing at points less than 12 on our logarithmic time-line.

If we imagine the Universe moving through points smaller and smaller than 12, the nucleons are pushed closer and closer together and the temperature gets higher and higher. By the time we reach −4 on the scale, the Universe is only about 250 kilometers across, no larger than an asteroid, though it still contains all the mass of the present-day Universe. The asteroid-sized Universe has an average temperature of about 1,000,000,000,000° K. (a trillion degrees).

At points smaller than −4, the Universe is too small and too hot for nucleons to exist. In other words, nucleons did not form until 1/10,000 seconds after the big bang. From 1/10,000 seconds to 100,000 years after the big bang we had the Nucleon-Universe and from 100,000 years after the big bang to the present, we have had the Matter-Universe.

In point of ordinary arithmetical time, the Matter-Universe has lasted 150,000 times as long as the Nucleon-Universe. What's more, the Matter-Universe is steadily, if slowly, increasing the ratio of endurance as it continues to exist for what will undoubtedly prove to be many billions of additional years.

On the logarithmic scale, however, which measures time by events rather than by arithmetical duration, the Nucleon-Universe has lasted for 16 intervals (−4 to 12) while the Matter-Universe has so far lasted 5-2/3 intervals (see Figure 3). This means that about three times as many events took place during the apparently short lifetime of the Nucleon-Universe as during the apparently long lifetime of the Matter-Universe. The Matter-Universe would have to continue to endure for something like 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 additional years in something like its present form in order to equal the Nucleon-Universe in event-content.

Until recently, physicists could only go back to about −4 on the logarithmic scale. They could not tell what was taking place within the first 1/10,000 seconds after the big bang, when the Universe was far smaller than a sizable asteroid and far hotter than a trillion degrees. All they could say was that nucleons could not exist.

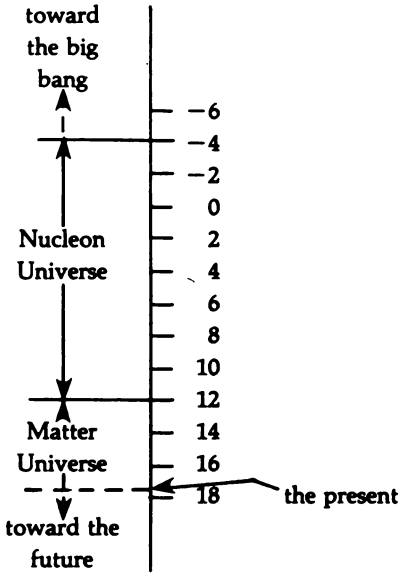
The concept of quarks arose in the 1960's. They are the fundamental particles of which the nucleons are constructed. Unlike the nucleons, but like the electrons, the quarks are apparently point-objects and do not take up volume.

During the first ten-thousandth of a second after the big bang, then, what exists are not nucleons, but quarks, and in that interval, we have the "Quark-Universe."

In the 1970's, new, very general theories have been devised covering

three of the four known types of interactions in the Universe under an umbrella of similar mathematical treatment. Such "Grand Unified Theories" (GUTs) for the two nuclear interactions (the strong and the weak) and for the electromagnetic interactions as well, gives some leads for treating the Quark-Universe.

Figure 3 — Nucleon-Universe



Right now, the three interactions covered by GUTs are widely different in strength, with the strong interaction 137 times as strong as the electromagnetic interaction, which is in turn about 10,000,000,000,000 (ten trillion) times as strong as the weak interaction.

As the temperature gets higher and higher, however, the three forces become equal in strength and in other properties as well, fading into a single interaction.

It is thought that if the temperature gets high enough, even the gravitational interaction will join the rest. The gravitational interaction is the least intense of the four, being weaker than even the weak interaction by a factor of 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (1 nonillion). Nevertheless, given a high enough temperature, it will strengthen and become part of the one primordial interaction. The only trouble is that nothing physi-

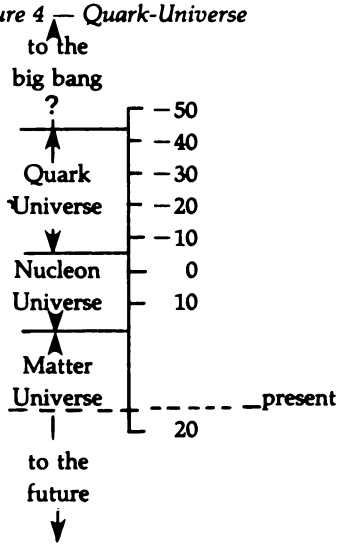
cists can yet do has served to place the gravitational interaction under the same unbrella as the other three.

Making use of GUTs, which were worked out only to explain subatomic relationships, physicists find they can make apparently useful calculations tending to describe the properties of the very early Universe, though a lot depends on just which variety of GUTs they use.*

Right now, some physicists trace the Universe all the way back to point −43 on the logarithmic scale. That point is $1/10^{43}$ seconds after the big bang.

At 10^{-43} seconds, the Universe is of infinitesimal size compared even to a proton, for instance, and has an average temperature of 100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000° K. (100 nonillion degrees). At such a temperature, gravitational effects are strong enough to have to be taken into account, but the theory to do so is lacking. Physicists, therefore, cannot go to numbers smaller than point −43. The Quark-Universe goes from −43 to −4. Points smaller than −43 represent an unknown region (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 — Quark-Universe



** Which variety will win out depends on the exact results of delicate measurements of phenomena like proton decay which physicists hope eventually to be able to make.*

As you see, the Quark-Universe lasted 39 divisions on the scale as compared to 16 divisions for the Nucleon-Universe and 5-2/3 for the Matter-Universe. And who knows how many divisions the pre-Quark Universe lasted or how many different types of the Universes there were in the crucial duodecillionths of a second before quarks came into existence.

In fact, if we insist on looking backward in time through a logarithmic scale, it would seem that the Universe extends an infinite distance through a never-ending series of intervals, each equal in amount of change-content. To the left of −43 are −44, −45 and so on indefinitely. Can it be that we must conclude the big bang never really took place because it took place an infinite number of divisions ago containing an infinite number of events.

I don't believe that. Here's my own *guess* about it.*

As one moves farther and farther down the scale into smaller and smaller numbers, and the Universe becomes ever more compressed and ever hotter, there is a tendency to form more and more massive particles. These ultra-massive particles could not possibly exist today because there is nowhere energy sufficiently concentrated to form them. Such an energy-concentration did exist in the very early Universe, however.

In that case, if we go far enough back in time, might not the Universe have been tiny enough and hot enough for a *single particle* to exist with the mass of the entire Universe. My own selection for the name of such a particle would be a "holon" (the "particle of the whole," so to speak).

Perhaps that is the ultimate retreat past-ward on the logarithmic scale. The big bang consisted, we might speculate, in the creation of a holon with the mass of a hundred billion galaxies squeezed into a single particle with an unimaginably small volume, a particle as small relative to a proton, perhaps, as a proton is to the present-day Universe.

Suppose that if we go backward along the logarithmic scale into the far, far past, the compression and temperature at point −100 is enough to make it possible for the holon to exist. Why not consider that the big bang takes place at −100?

The holon is unstable and breaks down into smaller particles in an unimaginably brief moment of time. These smaller particles repel each other intensely so that the Universe spreads outward and, in consequence, cools. The smaller particles break down further in a slightly longer moment of time and so on. The expansion and cooling continues, and at −43, quarks are beginning to form and the single existing interaction divides into

* *Most of the rest of this essay consists of my own guesses. No one else is to be blamed for it.*

two forms, one of which rapidly weakens with falling temperature to become what we now recognize as the gravitational interaction.

As expansion-cooling continues, two other interactions break away and weaken, taking us on the high-road to the present-day four interactions which, in the low temperatures of the contemporary Universe, seem irretrievably different.

Meanwhile, at −4, the quarks combine with each other to form nucleons, and at 12, the nucleons combine with each other or with electrons (or both) to form atoms and matter. As we progress past 12, the chaotic melange of atoms breaks up into galaxy-cluster-sized turbulences and these condense into stars so that the Universe becomes the familiar one of today — the slow-changing, incredibly slow-motion appendix to the long, exciting, and immensely changeful Universes of the far past, all of which were over (by arithmetic time) in less time than Homo sapiens has existed.

At −4, where pre-quark particles form quarks for the first time, we are at an important crossroads for here we encounter something we call "the law of consevation of baryon number." This law, deduced from observations in our contemporary Universe, states that the total number of baryons minus anti-baryons in the Universe must remain constant. (An anti-baryon is precisely the same as a corresponding baryon in almost all properties except a particularly important one such as electric charge or magnetic orientation — in which it is precisely opposite.)

If a baryon is destroyed, a balancing anti-baryon must be destroyed with it, and both converted into photons. If a baryon is brought into existence out of photons, then a balancing anti-baryon must also be brought into existence. In either case, the total number of baryons minus anti-baryons remains unchanged. Included among the baryons are the protons and neutrons, as well as the quarks that make them up.

Thus, a proton and anti-proton can undergo mutual annihilation, as can a neutron and anti-neutron. In addition, a quark and anti-quark of the same color and flavor can annihilate each other. Again protons and anti-protons must be produced in pairs, as is true of neutrons and anti-neutrons, and (given equivalence in flavor and color) quarks and anti-quarks.

Consequently, when pre-quark particles break down, it would seem that they must form quarks and anti-quarks in equal numbers. As the temperature drops further, those quarks and anti-quarks would annihilate each other to produce photons. The Universe would end up with no nucleons at

all, and therefore no atoms, and therefore no stars and galaxies. In short, the Universe, as we know it, would not exist.

Where, then, did the Universe come from?

GUTs make it plain, however, that the theory of conservation of baryon number is not true, but only *almost* true. Thus, these new theories suggest that protons have a half life of 10^{31} years (see AND AFTER MANY A SUMMER DIES THE PROTON, September 1981), breaking down into non-baryons such as positrons and neutrinos. It can do so even without the corresponding breakdown of anti-protons.

Similarly, it is possible for a baryon to be produced without the production of a corresponding anti-baryon, though in a vanishingly small percentage of cases. As the temperature rises to dizzying heights, this asymmetric tendency grows more important, though it is never overwhelming.

Even at the many trillions of degrees of temperature under which the pre-quark particles are breaking down, the asymmetry would only be one part in a billion. For every 1,000,000,000 anti-quarks formed, 1,000,000,001 quarks are formed.

This means that for every 1,000,000,000 anti-quarks undergoing mutual annihiliation with 1,000,000,000 quarks, 1 single and lonely quark is left over. The tiny percentage of left-over quarks is sufficient to produce enough nucleons to make up the stars and galaxies of our Universe. It is a small, but crucial asymmetry (as I promised you in the introduction).

At the present moment, there are indeed about a billion photons in the Universe (formed from that primordial mutual annihilation for every existing baryon). What's more, as nearly as we can tell, everything we know in the Universe seems to be composed of baryons just about exclusively, with virtually no samples of anti-baryons existing. (This was something that badly puzzled physicists when the law of conservation of baryon number was thought to be absolute.)

But why is it quarks, nucleons, and matter that is produced in slight excess, rather than anti-quarks, anti-nucleons, and anti-matter?

My own guess is that this asymmetry is inherent in the original holon and that there might also be an anti-holon in which anti-quarks would appear in slight excess so that an Anti-Universe of anti-matter would eventually be formed. (The photons of such an Anti-Universe would be identical with the photons of a Universe in all respects, however.)

If there are an infinite number of holons produced here and there in what I choose to call "hyperspace," half should be holons and half anti-holons. In fact, I suspect that they are produced in pairs, with every big

bang actually a double big bang, producing a holon/anti-holon pair. Thus, for our Universe there is a corresponding Anti-Universe which we cannot reach or impinge on in any way — nor it with us.

But where does the vast mass of the holon/anti-holon pair come from? Does it suddenly appear out of nothing? Or are we forced, finally, to postulate a Divine Creator.

I prefer to wonder if the holon-anti-holon pair might not actually appear out of nothing.

Suppose there is such a thing as "negative energy" which has the property of being able to combine with ordinary energy and cancel it out, leaving nothing. For every holon/anti-holon pair there might be a negative-holon/negative-anti-holon pair also formed; the two pairs together adding to nothing and therefore, mathematically at least, being equivalent to nothing. It would not be strange to have nothing appear out of nothing.

Thus, $(+1) + (-1) = 0$. If you have no money, you have nothing (fiscally speaking). If someone owes you a dollar and you owe someone else a dollar, you still have nothing — though you can now collect what is owed you and delay paying what you owe, so that you have a dollar to do something with.

In the same way, the quadruple holon is nothing, but the individual members can be played with for a time. The four holons appear out of nothing, each expanding in a quadruple big bang and playing out a temporary game as separate Universe, and each eventually contracting into a quadruple big crunch in which all the events of the expansion reverse themselves, right down to the final disappearance, into the nothingness from which they came. (And there may be an infinite number of such quadruple Universes, coming and going.)

This, you will note, repeats the thesis of my essay I'M LOOKING OVER A FOUR-LEAF CLOVER (September 1966) which I still stand by. In the earlier essay, I had to rely on the dubious concept of anti-gravity to separate matter and anti-matter. Now I can accept, instead, the crucial asymmetry inherent in GUTs, which is a big improvement.

I must still make use of the dubious concept of anti-energy, however. There I must wait longer for science to catch up.

Larry Niven, equally at home in deep space or the land of magic, here offers a fast-paced fantasy adventure set in the same Warlock's universe as "What Good Is A Glass Dagger?" (September 1972). Mr. Niven's collaborator, Dian Girard, is a full-time computer programmer with stories published in Isaac Asimov's *and various anthologies.*

Talisman

BY

LARRY NIVEN and DIAN GIRARD

The stranger swung his baggage off his horse's back, patted the animal on the side of the neck, and handed the reins to the stablehand. Old Kasan was rarely interested in people; he barely glanced at the stranger. Slanted eyes, round face with a yellow tinge...

Kasan led the animal to an empty stall and gave it food and water. Now, the beast was a puzzler. It suffered his ministrations with an air of strained patience. Its tail ended in the kind of brush usually seen on an ass. Kasan fancied that its look was one of tolerant contempt.

"Ah, horse, you underestimate me," Kasan said. "I won't be tending other people's horses forever." Horses did not often mock Kasan's daydreams. This one's nicker sounded too much like a snicker. "It's true! Some day I'll own my own rental stable—" And Kasan fondled the beast's ears and mane, as if to thank it for listening.

Under its shaggy forelock he felt a hard circular scar.

He told Bayram Ali about it when he went in for lunch. "It's a unicorn. The horn's been chopped off. What kind of man would be riding a disguised unicorn?"

The innkeeper said, "Sometimes I wonder why I put up with your stories, Kasan."

"You can feel the stub yourself!"

"No doubt. At least don't be bothering my guests with such tales." And Bayram Ali set a tankard of ale next to Kasan's midday cheese and bread. Kasan opened his mouth to retort, noticed the ale, and kept silent.

And Bayram Ali took counsel with himself.

Strange beasts like the one munching hay in his stable were often found in the company of strange men. The

traveler might be a sorcerer ... though they were rare these days. More likely he was a magician on his way to Rynildissen. Bayram had seen the man carry two heavy bags up to his room. It would be interesting to know what was in them, and if it would be worthwhile to lighten them a little.

Bayram Ali never robbed his guests. It was a point of honor. He preferred to leave the work and any possible danger to a professional. He looked around the crowded common room. It was smoky and odorous with the scents of cooking and human bodies. There was much laughter and spilling of wine. Unfortunately, most of the light-fingered brethren present had hasty tempers and were too quick to pull a knife. Bayram would not have violence in his inn.

Across the room his small pretty wife, Esme, was struggling to carry a huge frothy pitcher of ale. Two men were pushing and shoving each other for the honor of carrying it for her. Just beyond them, leaning back on a rough bench with her shoulders against the wall, Sparthera was laughing and yelling at the two combatants.

Sparthera. Bayram Ali grinned broadly. The slim young thief was just what he had in mind. She was daring without being reckless, and had no morals to speak of. They had made more than one bargain in the past.

He pushed his way across the room, pausing to grab up the pitcher his wife was carrying and slam it down in front of a customer. He knocked the combatants' heads together, sending them into hysterical laughter, and sent Esme back to the kitchen with a hearty slap on her firm round backside.

"Ay, Sparthera!"

The thief laughed up at him. She was finely built and slender, with a tangled mass of tawny hair and high firm breasts. Her large hazel eyes were set wide over a short straight nose and full red lips.

"Well, Bayram Ali, have you come over to knock my head against something too?" She hooked her thumbs in the belt of her leather jerkin and stretched out a pair of lean leather-clad legs.

"No, little thief. I wondered if you had noticed a certain stranger among my guests."

"Oh?" She had lost the smile.

Bayram Ali sat down on the bench next to her and lowered his voice. "A smooth-skinned man from the East, with bulging saddlebags. His name is Sung Ko Ja. Old Kasan says he came riding a unicorn, with the beast's horn cut off to disguise it."

"A sorcerer!" Sparthera shook her head firmly. "No. I'd as soon try to rob the statue of Khulm. I don't want anything to do with sorcerers."

"Oh, I hardly think he's a sorcerer," the innkeeper said soothingly. "No more than a magician, if that. A sorcerer wouldn't need to disguise anything. This man is trying to avoid drawing attention to himself. He must

have something a thief would want, hmm?"

Sparthera frowned and thought for a moment. No need to ask the terms of the bargain. It would be equal shares, and cheating was expected. "All right. When he comes down to the common room for dinner, or goes out to the privy, let me know. I'll go up and look around his room."

It was several hours before Sung Ko Ja came back down the stairs. The sun was just setting and Esme and her buxom daughters were beginning to serve the evening meal. Sparthera was sitting at one of the small tables near the kitchen door. Bayram Ali brushed by her with a pot of stew.

"That's the one," he whispered. "With the slanted eyes. His room is the third on the left."

Only Sparthera's eyes moved. Around forty, she thought, and distinctly foreign: round of face, but not fat, with old-ivory skin and dark almond eyes, and the manner of a lord. He seemed to be settling in for dinner. Good.

Sparthera moved quickly up the stairs and along the hall, counting doors. The third door didn't move when she pushed on the handle. She tried to throw her weight against it, and couldn't; somehow she couldn't find her balance.

A spell?

She went along to the end of the hall where one small window led out onto the first story roof. Outside, a scant two feet of slippery thatch separated the second story wall and a drop to the cobblestones in the stableyard.

The sun had set. The afterglow was bright enough to work in ... perhaps not dark enough to hide her? But behind the inn were only fields, and those who had been seeding the fields were gone to their suppers. There was nobody to watch Sparthera work her way around to the window of the magician's room.

The narrow opening was covered with oiled paper. She slit it neatly with the tip of the knife she always carried, and reached through. Or tried to. Something blocked her.

She pushed harder. She felt nothing, but her hand wouldn't move.

She swung a fist at the paper window. Her hand stopped jarringly; and this time she felt her own muscles suddenly lock. Her own strength had stopped her swing. She had no way to fight such magic. Sparthera hung from the roof by her hands and dropped the remaining four feet to the ground. She dusted herself off and re-entered the inn through the front.

Sung Ko Ja was still eating his meal of roast fowl, bread, and fruit. Bayram Ali was hovering around with one eye on the magician and the other on the stairs. Sparthera caught his eye.

He joined her. "Well?"

"I can't get in. There's a spell on the room."

The innkeeper's face fell; then he shrugged. "Pity."

"I want very much to know what that man has that he thinks is so important." She bit one finger and considered the ivory-skinned man dining peacefully on the other side of the room. "He doesn't have the look of the ascetic. What do you think? Would he like a woman to keep him warm on such a cold night?"

"Sparthera, have you considered what you're suggesting? My inn's reputation is important to me. If I offer, you'll ... well. You'd have to *do* it."

"Well?"

"The one time I myself made such a suggestion, you nearly cut my throat."

"That was years ago. I was ... it had been ... I'd only just thrown that damned tinker out on his ear. I didn't like men much just then. Besides, this is different. It's business."

Bayram Ali eyed her doubtfully. She was dressed more like a young boy than a woman. Still, the magician was a foreigner. Probably all of the local women looked odd to him. Bayram shrugged and pushed his way across the room.

Sung Ko Ja looked up.

The innkeeper smiled broadly. "The wine was good, eh?"

"Drinkable."

"And the fowl? It was young, tender, was it not? Cooked to a nicety?"

"I ate it. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, noble sir! The night will be cold, and I have a girl. Such a girl! A vision of delight, a morsel of sweetness..."

Sung Ko Ja waved an impatient hand. "All right. So she is everything you claim she is. How much?"

"Ten."

"Too much. Six."

Bayram Ali looked stunned, then hurt. "Sir, you insult this princess among women. Why, only last week she was a virgin. Nine."

"Seven."

"Eight and a half."

"Done. And bring me another bottle of wine." Sung tossed down the last few drops in his tankard and paid the innkeeper. Sparthera was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs. He looked her over briefly and then started up the stairs, carrying his fresh bottle of wine. "Well, come on, girl."

He stopped at the door to his room and made a few quick gestures with his left hand before he pushed it open.

"Why did you do that?" Sparthera asked in girlish innocence.

"To raise the spell that protects my room. Otherwise I couldn't let you in, my sweet one." He laughed softly and burped.

Sparthera stopped in the doorway. "If you have a spell on this room, does that mean I'll be locked in?"

"No, no. You're free to come and go — as often as you like." He chuckled. "Until the dawn light comes through that window at the end of the hall and relinks the spell."

She entered. The low bed — hardly more than a pallet — held a straw-filled mattress and bedding woven

from the local cotton and wool. There was wood stacked in the small fireplace grate and flint and steel lay next to a single candle in a holder. The magician's saddlebags were sitting on the floor by the bed.

Sung looked up at the small window where Sparthera had slashed out the paper and frowned. A cold draft was coming through the opening.

"I'll light the fire, shall I?" Sparthera asked.

She hurried to start a small blaze while Sung, swaying slightly on his feet, considered the open window. Best that he be distracted. She asked, "Is it true that you're a magician?"

He smiled. "There is only one sort of magic I have in mind at the moment."

Sparthera hid her sudden nervousness behind a smile. "Ah, but did you bring your wand?"

The flickering firelight threw their shadows on the wall as Sung guided her to the narrow bed. What followed left Sparthera pleasantly surprised. For all his smooth skin and foreign ways the stranger proved more than equal to other men she'd known. He was considerate ... almost as if she were paying, not he. Even if nothing came of this venture, the evening hadn't been wasted.

Two hours later she was beginning to change her mind.

They were sitting upon the straw-filled mattress, sharing the last of the wine. Sparthera was naked; Sung still wore a wide cloth belt. He had opened one of his bags and was showing her a variety of small trinkets. There were birds that chirped when you tightened a spring, a pair of puppets on strings, flowers made of yellow silk, and squares of bright paper that Sung folded to look like bears and fish. He was very drunk, and talkative.

"The immortal Sung and his family rule in the land of the Yellow River, a mountainous land far to the east. I was head of the family for twenty years. Now I have abdicated the throne in favor of my son. But I carried away some magic. Watch: I put a half-twist in this strip of paper, join the ends, and now it has only one side and one edge..."

Sparthera was restless and bored. She had come upstairs expecting to deal with a magician. She had found a cheap toymaker who couldn't hold his wine. She watched his strong agile fingers twisting a scrap of paper into a bird ... and wondered. His forehead was high and smooth, his face a little too round for her taste, but undeniably good to look on. It was hard to believe that he could be a complete fool. There must be more to him than cheap toys and bragging and a way with women.

He was rummaging in his bag again and she caught a glimpse of gleaming metal.

"What is that? The box?"

"The pointer. The key to Gar's treasure. A gift to set me on the road."

"Gar's treasure. What's that?" It sounded vaguely familiar.

"It's a secret," Sung said, and he

closed that saddlebag and reached across for the other. And while he was turned away from her, Sparthera pulled a twist of paper from her hair, and opened it, and shook white powder into Sung's half-empty goblet.

She didn't use it all, and it probably wasn't needed. Sung was on his back and snoring a few minutes later, long before the drug could have taken effect. Sparthera watched him for a few cautious minutes more before she reached into the saddlebag.

She drew out a silver box. There were pieces of jade and carnelian set in mountings on the lid and sides.

She was half-afraid that a spell sealed this too, but it opened easily enough. The inside was lined with faded crimson velvet, and all it held was an elongated teardrop of tarnished bronze. There were tiny silver runes inlaid along the length of the dark metal.

Sparthera picked it up and turned it this way and that. It was thicker than her forefinger and just about as long. A conical hole had been drilled nearly through its underside.

The box was worth something; but was it worth angering a magician? Probably not, she decided reluctantly. And it certainly wasn't worth killing for, not here. Bayram Ali would never allow such a thing. She would have to flee Tarseny's Rest forever ... and Sparthera had none of the tourist urge in her.

The same applied to Sung's cloth belt. She had felt the coins in it when they made the two-backed beast, but it was no fortune.

Sung surely ought to be robbed. It would do him good, make him less gullible. But not tonight. Sparthera dropped the pointer in its box, closed it, and was reaching for the saddlebag when she remembered.

Gar had been Kaythill's magician.

And Kaythill was a bandit chief who had raided the lands around Ryn-ildissen City, a hundred years ago. He had lasted some twenty years, until the King's soldiers caught him traveling alone. Under torture Kaythill had steered them to some of his spoils. The rest? A wagonload of gold and jewels had been stolen by Gar the magician. Kaythill and his men had been scouting the countryside for Gar when the soldiers trapped him.

Of course the King's men searched for Gar. Some vital pieces of military magic were among the missing treasure. There had been rewards posted, soldiers everywhere, rumors .. and Gar's treasure had grown in the telling, had grown into legend, until it reached Sparthera via her father. She had been ... six? It was a wonder she remembered at all.

And this trinket would point the way to Gar's treasure?

Sparthera dressed hurriedly, snatched up the silver box and left the room. She hesitated in the hall, looking first at her trophy and then back at the door. What would he do when he woke and found the box missing? She

had only seen him drunk. A magician sober and looking for lost property might be an entirely different matter.

She pushed at the door. It opened easily. He hadn't lied then. She could come and go as she pleased — until dawn.

Sparthera hurried down the stairs and out of the inn. It was nearly midnight and there were only a few jovial souls left in the common room. None saw her leave.

Patrols rarely came to the Thieves' Quarter of Tarseny's Rest; but in the Street of the Metalworkers they were common. Sparthera went warily, waiting until a pair of guards had passed before she began throwing pebbles at a certain upstairs window.

The window came alight. Sparthera stepped out of the shadows, showed herself. Presently Tinx appeared, rubbing his eyes, looking left and right before he pulled her inside.

"Sparthera! What brings you here, little thief? Are the dogs finally at your heels and you need a place to hide?"

"How long would it take you to copy this?" She opened the box and held out the bronze teardrop.

"Hmmm. Not long. The lettering is hard, but I do have some silver."

"How long?"

"An hour or two."

"I need it now, tonight."

"Sparthera, I *can't*. I need my sleep."

"Tinx, you owe me."

Tinx owed her twice. Once, for a pair of thieves who had tried to interest Sparthera in robbing Tinx's shop. In Sparthera's opinion, robbing a citizen of Tarseny's Rest was fouling one's own nest. She had informed on them. And once she had worked like a slave in his shop, to finish a lucrative job on time; for Sparthera was not always a thief. But Tinx had had other, more pressing debts, and he still owed Sparthera most of her fee.

The metalworker lifted his hands helplessly and rolled his eyes to heaven. "Will I be rid of you then?"

"Finished and done. All debts paid."

"Oh, all right then!" He sighed and, still grumbling about his lost night's sleep, went back inside to light some candles and a lantern to work by.

Sparthera prowled restlessly about the tiny shop. She found means to make tea. Afterward she prowled some more, until Tinx glared at her and demanded she stay in one place. Then she sat, while Tinx sawed and filed and hammered until he had a bronze teardrop; gouged grooves in the surface; pounded silver wire into the grooves; polished it, compared it to the original, then held it in tongs over a flame until tarnish dulled the silver. He asked, "Just how good are your client's eyes?"

"I don't really know, but by Khulm we're running out of time!"

"Well, what do you think?" He handed her copy and original.

She turned them swiftly in her hands, then dropped the copy into the box and the original into her sleeve. "Has to be good enough. My thanks, Tinx." She was already slipping through the door. "If this works out..." She was down the street and out of earshot, leaving Tinx to wonder if she had made him a promise. Probably not.

She stopped inside the front door of the inn. A moment to get her breath, else the whole inn would hear her. Then upstairs, on tiptoe. Third door down. Push. It swung open, and Sparthera swallowed her gasp of relief.

The magician was still asleep and still snoring. He looked charmingly vulnerable, she thought. Sparthera pushed the box into a saddlebag, under a tunic. It cost her a wrench to leave it, but far better to lose a trinket worth a few gold pieces than to face the wrath of an outraged sorcerer. Sparthera had bigger fish to fry. She tiptoed out and shut the door. The first gray glow of morning was showing through the window at the end of the hall.

Sparthera stayed out of sight until she saw Sung mount his odd shaggy horse and start off down the King's Way to Rynildissen. He seemed unsteady in the saddle, and once he clutched at his head. That worried her. "Khulm bear witness, I *did* go easy on that powder," she told herself.

She found Bayram Ali counting money at a table in the common room. He looked up at her expectantly.

"Well? What did you find?"

"A few toys. Some scraps of colored paper and an old silver box that isn't worth the trouble it would get us."

"No money?"

"Coins in a belt. He never took it off. There wasn't much in it ... not enough, anyway."

Bayram Ali scowled. "Very intelligent of you, dear. Still, a pity. He left this for you." He tucked two fingers into his wide cummerbund and fished out a pair of silver coins. "Perhaps you've found a new calling. One for you and one for me, hmm?"

Sparthera smiled, letting her strong, even white teeth show. "And how much did he pay you last night?"

"Six pieces of silver," Bayram Ali said happily.

"You sold me so cheaply? You're a liar and your mother was insulted on a garbage heap."

"Well. He offered six. We settled for eight."

"Four for you, four for me, hmm?"

He looked pained. Sparthera took her five pieces of silver, winked, and departed, wondering what Sung Ko Ja had really paid. That was part of the fun of bargaining: wondering who had cheated whom.

But this time Sparthera had the pointer.

On a bald hill east of the village, Sparthera took the bronze teardrop from her sleeve, along with a needle and the cork from one of Sung Ko Ja's

bottles of wine. She pushed the base of the needle into the cork, set it down, and balanced the pointer on the needle. "Pointer! Pointer, show me the way to Gar's treasure!" she whispered to it, and nudged it into a spin.

Three times she spun it and marked where it stopped, pointing north, and northwest, and east.

She tried holding it in her hand, turning in a circle with her eyes closed, trying to feel a tug. She tried balancing it on her own fingernail. She studied the runes, but they meant nothing to her. After two hours she was screaming curses like a Euphrates fishwife. It didn't respond to that either.

Sitting on the bare dusty ground with her chin in her hands and the pointer lying in the dirt in front of her, Sparthera felt almost betrayed. So close! She was so close to wealth that she could almost hear the tinkle of golden coins. She needed advice, and the one person who might help her was one she vowed never to see again.

A faint smile crossed her face as she remembered screaming at him, throwing his bags and gear out of the tiny hut they shared, swearing by the hair on her head that she'd die and rot in hell before she ever went near him again. That damned tinker! Pot-mender, amateur spell-caster, womanizer: his real magic was in his tongue. She'd left her home and family to follow him, and all of his promises had been so much air.

She'd heard that he lived up in the hills now, that he called himself Shubar Khan and practiced magic to earn a living. If he cast spells the way he mended pans, she thought sourly, he wouldn't be of much use to her. But perhaps he'd learned something ... and there wasn't anyone else she could go to. She stood up, dusted herself off, bent to pick up the bronze teardrop.

The sky was clouding over and the scent of rain was in the air. It matched her dismal mood.

What about her vow? It had been a general oath, not bound by a particular god, but she had meant it with all her heart. Sometimes vows like that were the most dangerous, for who knew what wandering elemental might be listening? She leaned against Twilight, smoothing his tangled mane and staring out over his back at the rolling foothills and the mountains beyond. Life was too dear and Gar's treasure too important to risk either on a broken vow. She took her knife from its sheath and started to hack at her long tawny hair.

Shubar Khan's house, hardly more than a hut, was both small and dirty. Sparthera reined her horse to a halt before the door. She looked distastefully at a hog carcass lying in the center of a diagram scratched in the hard dry ground.

She had sworn never to speak his name, but that name was *Tashubar*. She called, "Shubar Khan! Come out, Shubar Khan!" She peered into the dark doorway. A faint odor of burning

fat was the only sign of habitation.

"Who calls Shubar Khan?" A man appeared in the doorway and blinked out at her. Sparthera swung herself down from Twilight's back and lifted her chin a little arrogantly, staring at him.

"Sparthera?" He rubbed the side of his face and laughed dryly. "Oh, ho. The last time we saw one another you threw things at me. I think I still have a scar somewhere. You wouldn't care to see it, would you? Ah, well, I thought not."

He cocked his head to one side and nodded. "You're still beautiful. Just like you were when I found in that haystack, Heh, heh, heh. I like you better with hair, though. What happened to it?"

"I swore an oath," she said shortly, wondering a little at what passing time could do to a man. He had been a good thirty years old to her fourteen when they met. Now she was twenty-six, and he was potbellied and sweaty, with a red face and thinning hair and lecherous little eyes. He wore felt slippers with toes that turned up, and five layers of brightly striped woollen robes. He scratched now and then, absentmindedly.

But he still had the big, knowing hands, and strong shoulders that sloped up into his neck, and hadn't he always scratched? And he'd never been thin, and his eyes couldn't have shrunk. The change was in her. Suddenly she hungered to get the matter over with and leave Shubar Khan to the past, where he belonged.

"I've come on busines. I want you to fix something for me." She held out the piece of bronze. "It's supposed to be a pointer, but it doesn't work."

A small dirty hand reached out for the pointer. "I can fix that!" Sparthera spun around, reaching for her knife.

"My apprentice," Shubar Khan explained. "How would you fix it, boy?"

"There's a storm coming up." The boy, hardly more than twelve, looked at his master with sparkling eyes. "I can climb a tree and tie the thing to a branch high up. When the lightning strikes—"

"You short-eared offspring of a spavined goat!" Shubar bellowed at him. "That would only make it point to the pole star — if it didn't melt first — and if it were iron instead of bronze! Bah!'

The boy cringed back into the gloom of the hut, which was filled with dry bones, aborted sheep fetuses, and pig bladders stuffed with odd ointments. There was even a two-inch-long unicorn horn prominently displayed on a small silk pillow.

Shubar Khan peered at the silver runes. He mumbled under his breath, at length. Was he reading them? "Old Sorcerer's Guild language," he said, "with some mistakes. What is it supposed to point *at*?"

"I don't know," Sparthera lied. "Something buried, I think."

Shubar Khan unrolled one of the

scrolls, weighted it open with a couple of bones, and began to read in a musical foreign tongue. Presently he stopped. "Nothing. Whatever spell was on it, it seems as dead as the gods."

"Curse my luck and your skill! Can't you do anything?"

"I can put a contagion spell on it for two pieces of silver." He looked her up and down and grinned. "Or anything else of equal or greater value."

"I'll give you the coins," Sparthera said shortly. "What will the spell do?"

Shubar Khan laughed until his paunch shook. "Not even for old time's sake? What a pity. As to the spell, it will make this thing seek whatever it was once bound to. We're probably lucky the original spell wore off. A contagion spell is almost easy."

Sparthera handed over the money. Gar's treasure had already cost her far too much. Shubar Khan ushered her and his apprentice — loaded down with phials, a pair of scrolls, firewood, and a small cauldron — to a steep crag nearby.

"Why do we have to come out here?" Sparthera asked.

"We're just being cautious," Shubar Khan said soothingly. He set up the cauldron, emptied a few things into it, lit the fire the apprentice had set, and handed the apprentice the bronze teardrop and one of the scrolls. "When the cauldron smokes, just read this passage out loud. And remember to enunciate," he said as he grabbed Sparthera's arm and sprinted down the hill.

Sparthera looked uphill at the boy, "This is dangerous, isn't it? How dangerous?"

"I don't know. The original spell isn't working, but there may be some power left in it, and there's no telling what it might do. That's why magicians have apprentices."

They could hear the boy chanting in his childish treble, speaking gibbersish, but rolling his R's and practically spitting the P's. The clouds that had been gathering overhead took on a harsh ominous quality. The wind came up and the trees whipped and showered leaves on the ground.

A crack of lightning cast the entire landscape into ghastly brightness. Shubar Khan dove to the ground. Sparthera winced and then strained her eyes into the suddenly smoky air. There was no sign of the boy. Thunder rolled deafeningly across the sky.

Sparthera ran up the hill, heart thumping. The top of the crag was scorched and blackened. The iron cauldron was no more than a twisted blob of metal.

"Ooohhh!"

Shubar Khan's apprentice pulled himself to his feet and looked at her with huge eyes. His face was smudged, his hair scorched, and his clothing still smouldered. He held out a blackened fist with the bronze piece still in it.

"Did, did ... did it work?" he asked in a frightened croak.

Shubar Khan retrieved the pointer

and laid it on his palm. It slowly rotated to the right and stopped. He grinned broadly and patted the boy heartily on the shoulder.

"Excellent! We'll make a magician of you yet!" He turned to Sparthera and presented the pointer to her with a bow.

She tucked it inside her tunic. "Thank you," she said, feeling a little awkward.

Shubar Khan waved a muscular red hand. "Always pleased to be of service. Spells, enchantments, and glamours at reasonable rates. Maybe someday I can interest you in a love philtre."

Sparthera rode back down the mountain trail with the bronze teardrop tucked in her tunic, feeling its weight between her breasts like the touch of a lover's hand. Just above Tarseny's Rest she reined up to watch a small herd of gazelle bound across a nearby hill. Someday she would build a house on that hill. Someday, when she had Gar's treasure, she would build a big house with many rooms and many fireplaces. She would have thick rugs and fine furniture, and there would be servants in white tunics embroidered with red leaves.

She spurred her horse to the crest of the hill. Down below were the river and the town, and across the valley were more hills, leading away to distant mountains.

"I'm going to be rich!" she yelled. "Rich!"

The echoes boomed back, "Rich, rich, rich!" until they finally whimpered into silence. Twilight nickered and pulled at his reins. Sparthera laughed. She would have many horses when she was rich. Horses and cattle and swine.

She could almost see the hoard trickling through her fingers in a cascade of gold and rainbow colors. Money for the house and the animals and a dowry.

The dowry would buy her a husband: a fine, respectable merchant who would give her fat beautiful children to inherit the house and the animals. Sparthera took a last lingering look at the countryside before she swung herself back into the saddle. First, find the treasure!

She cantered back into town, put Twilight into the stable behind the lodging house, and went to her room. It was a tiny cubicle, with a pallet of cotton-covered straw and some blankets against one wall. Rough colorful embroideries hung on the wattle and daub walls: relics of the days at home on her father's farm. Another embroidery was thrown across a large wooden chest painted with flying birds, and a three-legged chair with flowers stencilled on the back stood in one corner.

Sparthera uncoverd the chest and threw open the lid. It was packed with odds and ends — relics of her childhood — and down at the bottom was a small pouch with her savings in it.

She opened the pouch and counted

the coins slowly, frowning. The search might take weeks or months. She would need provisions, extra clothes, and a pack animal to carry them. There wasn't enough here.

She would have to borrow or beg an animal from her family. She grimaced at the thought, but she had little choice.

It was a four hour ride to her father's farm. Her mother was out in the barnyard, feeding the chickens, when she rode in. The elder woman looked at her with what might have been resignation.

"Run out of money and come home again, have you?"

"Not this time," Sparthera said, dismounting and placing a dutiful kiss on her mother's cheek. "I need a horse or an ass. I thought maybe father had one I could borrow."

Her mother looked at her distastefully. "Always you dress like a man. No wonder no decent man ever looks at you. Why don't you give up all those drunkards you hang around with? Why don't you..."

"Mother, I need a horse."

"You've got one horse. You don't need another horse."

"Mother, I'm going on a trip and I need a pack horse." Sparthera's eyes lit with suppressed excitement. "When I come back, I'll be rich!"

"Humph. That's what you said when you ran off with that no-good pot mender. If your father were here, he'd give you *rich* all right! You're lucky he's in the mountains for a week. I don't know about horses. Ask Bruk. He's in the barn."

Her mother tossed another handful of grain to the chickens, and Sparthera started across the dusty barnyard.

"And get yourself some decent clothes!"

Sparthera sighed and kept moving. Her next-older brother was in the loft restacking sheaves of last season's wheat.

"Bruk? Have you got an extra horse?"

He looked down at her, squinting into the light from the open barn door. "Sparthera? You haven't been here for two months. Did you run out of pockets to pick, or just out of men?"

She grinned. "No more than you ever run out of women. Are you still rolling Mikka in her father's hay ricks?"

He climbed down from the loft, looking a little glum. "Her father caught us at it twelve days ago and now I've got to trade the rick for a marriage bed and everything that goes with it." He was a big man, well muscled, with a shock of corn-colored hair, dark eyes, and full sensuous lips. "Lost your hair, I see. Well, they say that comes of not enough candle-wick. Find yourself a man and we'll make it a double celebration."

Sparthera leaned against a stall and laughed heartily. "Caught at last! Well, it won't do you any harm and beds aren't as itchy as piles of hay. You

ought to be glad. Once you've married you'll be safe from all the other outraged fathers."

"Will I though? They may just come after me with barrel staves. And I hate to cut short a promising career. Oh, the youngest daughter of the family in the hollow has grown up to be..."

"Enough, Bruk. I need a horse. Have you got an extra one?"

He shook his head. "Twilight pulled up lame, did he?"

"No. I'm planning a trip and I need a pack animal."

Bruk scratched his head. "Can't you buy one in town? There are always horse dealers in the market square."

"I know too many people in Tarseny's Rest. I don't want them to know I'm taking this trip. Besides," she added candidly, "I don't have enough money."

"What are you up to, little sister? Murder, pillage, or simple theft?"

"Oh, Bruk, it's the chance to make a fortune! A chance to be rich!"

He shook his head disgustedly. "Not again. Remember that crockery merchant? And the rug dealer? And that tink—"

"This time it's different!"

"Oh, sure. Anyway, we haven't got a horse. Why don't you steal one?"

This time it was Sparthera's turn to look disgusted. "You can't just steal a horse on the spur of the moment. It's not like a pair of shoes, you know. You have to do a little planning and I don't have the time. You'd never make a decent thief! You'd just walk in, grab it by the tail and try to walk out." She pulled at her lower lip. "Now what am I going to do?"

They both stood there, thinking. Bruk finally broke the silence. "Well, if you only want it to carry a pack, you might make do with a wild ass. They break to a pack saddle pretty easy. There are some up in the foothills. I'll even help you catch one."

"I guess it's worth a try."

Bruk found a halter and a long rope, and led the way across the cultivated fields and up into the hills. The landscape was scrubby underbrush dotted with small stands of trees. There were knolls of rock, and one small stream that ran cackling down the slope.

Bruk stopped to study a pattern of tracks. "That'll be one ... spends a lot of time here, too ... yup, I'll bet it hides over in that copse. You go left and I'll go right. We'll get it when it comes out of the trees."

They circled cautiously toward a promising stand of small trees. Sure enough, Sparthera could hear something moving within the grove, and even caught a glimpse of brownish hide. A branch cracked under Bruk's boot, something brown exploded from the cover of the brush, and Bruk yelled, swinging the loop of his rope.

"Get the halter! Watch out for its hooves. Yeow, oooof!"

The animal whirled, bounced like a

goat on its small sturdy legs, and managed to butt Bruk in the middle. Bruk sat down heavily while Sparthera made a frantic grab for the trailing end of the rope.

The little animal, frantically trying to dodge her groping hands, was braying, whinnying, and making occasional high-pitched whistling noises. It was the size of a small pony and had a long silky mane that almost dragged the ground. Its tail was thick, muscular, and held up at an angle. It had two ridiculous little feathery wings, about as long as Sparthera's forearm, growing out of the tops of its shoulders.

Bruk staggered to his feet as Sparthera managed to catch and cling to the rope. He launched himself bodily at the beast, grabbed it around the neck, and threw it off balance. It fell heavily to one side, where it kicked its small feet and fluttered its tiny wings to the accompaniment of an incredible cacophony of hoots, whistles, and brays.

Sparthera clapped her hands over her ears and yelled. "That's no wild ass! What on earth is it? Some sort of magic beast?"

Bruk was busily fitting his halter on their uncooperative captive. "I don't know," he panted. "I think it's half ass and half nightmare. If a sorcerer dreamed it up, he must have been drunk."

He stood back and let it scramble to its feet. It lowered its head, pawed the ground savagely, lifted its tail, and jumped with all four feet. The maneuver carried it forward perhaps two paces, its little wings flapping frantically.

Sparthera burst out laughing, doubled over with mirth. When she recovered enough she stared at their captive and shook her head. "Do you think it can be broken to carry a pack?"

"Let's get it down to the barn and we'll try it with a pack saddle."

Getting the wingbeast down the hill was a production in its own right. It bolted, tried to roll, then dug its feet in like the most obstinate of jackasses. Finally, tired, irritated, and covered with grime, the three of them made it to the barnyard.

They managed to get the saddle on its back — after Sparthera had been butted and trampled and her brother had been dumped in the watering trough — and stood back to watch.

The small animal bucked. It turned, twisted, flapped its ridiculous little wings, and rolled in the dust. It tried to bite the saddle girth and scrape the saddle off against the fence. It kicked its heels and brayed. Just when they thought it would never quit, it stopped, sides heaving, and glared at them.

The next day it accepted a ripe apple from Sparthera, bit Bruk in the buttocks, and managed to bolt into the house, where Sparthera's mother hit it on the nose with a crock of pickled cabbage.

Sparthera was losing patience. It

was all taking too long. Had Sung Ko Ja discovered her trick? Was he searching Tarseny's Rest for the woman who had stolen his pointer? She had told Bayram Ali that she was visiting her parents. Someone would come to warn her, surely.

But nobody came, that day or the next; and a horrid thought came to her. Sung Ko Ja must have followed the pointer far indeed. Even without the pointer, he must have a good idea where the treasure lay. He might have continued on. At this moment he could be unearthing Sparthera's treasure!

It was three days before the winged beast gave up the fight, trotted docilely at the end of a rope, and accepted the weight of a loaded pack saddle. It even gave up trying to bite, as long as they kept out of its reach. Sparthera named it "Eagle."

"It would be better called 'Vulture!'" Bruk said, rubbing at a healing wound. "It's smart, though, I'll grant you that. Only took the beast three days to realize it couldn't get rid of that saddle."

"Three days," Sparthera said wearily. "Bruk, for once you were right. I should have stolen a horse."

She rode back to town leading the wingbeast along behind. It took her half a day to buy provisions and pack her clothing. In late afternoon she set out on the King's Road, holding the bronze pointer like the relic of some ancient and holy demigod.

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She was expecting to ride into the wilderness, into some wild, unpopulated area where a treasure could lie hidden for eighty years. But the pointer was tugging her along the King's Way, straight toward Rynildissen, the ruling city of the biggest state around. That didn't bother her at first. Rynildissen was four days' hard riding for a King's messenger, a week for a traveler on horseback, two for a caravan. And Gar's band had done their raiding around Rynildissen.

The King's Way was a military road. It ran wide as a siege engine and straight as an arrow's flight. It made for easy traveling, but Sparthera worried about sharing her quest with too much traffic. She found extensive litter beside the road: burnt-out campfires, horse droppings, garbage that attracted lynxes. It grew ever fresher. On her third afternoon she was not surprised to spy an extensive dust plume ahead of her. By noon of the next day she had caught up with a large merchant caravan.

She was about to ride up alongside the trailing wagon when she caught a glimpse of an odd shaggy horse with a tail like an ass. There was a figure in bulky Eastern robes on its back. Sung!

Sparthera pulled her horse hard to the side and rode far out over the rolling hill and away from the road. She had no desire to trade words with the smooth-faced magician. But what was he doing here? The caravan was protection from beasts and minor thieves;

but the caravan was *slow*. He could have been well ahead of Sparthera by now.

He didn't know the pointers had been switched! That *must* be it. The seeking-spell had been nearly dead already. Sung had followed it from far to the east; now he was following his memory, with no idea that anyone was behind him.

Then the important thing was to delay him. She must find the treasure, take it, and be miles away before Sung Ko Ja reached the site.

All day she paced the caravan. At dusk they camped round a spring. Leaving her horse, Sparthera moved down among the wagons, tents, oxen and camels. She avoided the campfires. Sung Ko Ja had pitched a small red and white striped tent. His unicorn was feeding placidly out of a nosebag.

Stealing a roll of rich brocade was easy. The merchant should have kept a dog. It was heavy stuff, and she might well be spotted moving it out of camp, but she didn't have to do that. After studying Sung's tent for some time, watching how soundly Sung slept, she crept around to the back of the tent and rolled the brocade under the edge. Then away, hugging the shadows, and into the hills before the moon rose. Dawn found her back on the highway, well ahead of the caravan, chuckling as she wondered how Sung would explain his acquisition.

When she dug the pointer out of her sleeve, her sense of humor quite vanished. The pointer was tugging her back. She must have ridden too far.

After a hasty breakfast of dried figs and jerked meat Sparthera started to retrace her path, paralleling the King's Way. Days of following the pointer had left painful cramping in both hands, but she dared not set it down now. At any moment she expected the bronze teardrop to pull her aside.

She was paying virtually no attention to her path. At the crest of a smooth hill, she looked up to see another horse coming toward her. Its rider was a smooth-faced man with skin the color of old ivory, and his almond eyes were amused. It was too late even to think of hiding.

"Oh ho! My sweet little friend from a week ago. What brings you onto the King's Way?"

"My hair," Sparthera improvised. "Cosmetics. There's a witch-woman who lives that way—" She gestured vaguely south, and gave him her best effort at a flirtatious smile. "—and I find I can afford her fees, thanks to the generosity of a slant-eyed magician."

"Oh, dear, and I had hoped your lips were aching for another kiss." He looked at her critically. "You don't need to visit any witch. Even shorn, you are quite enchanting. You must share my midday meal. I insist. Come, we can rest in the shade of those trees yonder."

Sparthera was afraid to spur her horse and flee. He might suspect nothing at all; else why had he joined

the caravan? She turned her horse obediently and rode to the shade of the small grove with him, trailing the wingbeast behind at the end of its halter.

Sung slid easily from his unicorn. He still didn't seem dangerous. She could insist on preparing the food. Wine she could spill while pretending to drink. She swung down from her horse—

Her head hurt. Her eyes wouldn't focus. She tried to roll over and her head pulsed in red pain. Her arms and legs seemed caught in something. Rope? She waited until her head stopped throbbing before she tried to learn more.

Then it was obvious. Her hands were tied behind her; a leather strap secured her ankles to one of the shade trees. Sung Ko Ja was sitting crosslegged on a rug in front of her, flipping a bronze teardrop in the air.

Bastard. He must have hit her on the head while she was dismounting.

"A week ago I noticed that someone had cut the paper out of my bedroom window," he said. "I woke the next morning with a foul taste in my mouth, but that could have been cheap wine, or too much wine. Last night some rogue put a roll of stolen dry goods in my baggage — which caused me no end of embarrassment. I would not ordinarily have thought of you in connection with this. I confess that my memories of our time together are most pleasant. However," he paused to sip at a bowl of tea. "However, my unicorn, who can whisper strange things when I want him to, and sometimes when I don't —"

"He *speaks*?"

The unicorn was glaring at her. Sparthera glared back. Magician or no, she felt that this was cheating, somehow.

"Such a disappointment," said Sung Ko Ja. "If only you had come to my arms last night, all of this might be different. You sadden me. Here you are, and here is this." He held up the pointer. "Why?"

She looked at the ground, biting her lip.

"Why?"

"Money, of course!" she blurted out. "You said that thing was the key to a treasure! Wouldn't you have taken it too, in my place?"

Sung laughed and rubbed his fingers over his chin. "No, I don't think so. But I am not you. It may be this was my fault. I tempted you."

He got to his feet. He tilted her head back with one hand so he could look into her eyes. "Now, what's to be done? Swear to be my slave and I'll take you along to look for Gar's treasure."

"A slave? Never! My people have always been free. I'd rather die than be a slave!"

Sung looked distressed. "Let's not call it slavery then, if you dislike it so much. Bondage? Binding? Let's say you will bind yourself to me. For seven

years and a day, or until we find treasure to equal your weight in gold."

"And if we find the treasure, what then?"

"Then you're free."

"That's not good enough. I want part of the treasure."

Sung laughed again, this time in pure amusement. "You bargain hard for one who has been pinioned and tied to a tree. All right. Part of the treasure then."

"How much of it?" she asked warily.

"Hmmm. I take the first and second most valuable items. We split the rest equally."

"Who decides—"

Sung was growing irritated. "I'll split the remaining treasure into two heaps. You choose which heap you want."

That actually sounded fair. "Agreed."

"Ah, but now it is my turn. What are you going to swear by, my little sweetheart? I want your oath that you'll offer me no harm, that you'll stay by my side and obey my commands, until the terms of the agreement are met."

Sparthera hesitated. It didn't take a magician to know how to make an oath binding. Even nations kept their oaths ... to the letter, and that could make diplomacy interesting...

She could be making herself rich. Or she could be throwing away seven years of her life. Would Sung hold still for a better bargain?

Not a chance. "All right. I'll swear by Khulm, the thieves' god who stands in the shrine at Rynildissen. May he break my fingers if I fail."

"You swear then?"

"I swear."

Sung bent down and kissed her heartily on the lips. Then he set about freeing her. He set out tea while she was rubbing her wrists. There was a lump on her head. The tea seemed to help.

She said, "We must be very near the treasure. The pointer led me back the way we came ... straight into your arms, in fact."

Sung chuckled. He fished the silver box out of his saddlebag. He opened it, took out Sparthera's counterfeit bronze teardrop, hesitated, then dropped it on the rug. He stood up with the genuine object in his hand.

Sparthera cried, "Stop! That's—" Too late. Sung had flung the genuine pointer into a grove of low trees.

"I'll keep yours," he said. "it's only for the benefit of people who think a box has to contain something. Now watch."

He pressed down on the silver box in two places and twisted four of the small stone ornaments. The box folded out flat into a cross-shape with one long arm.

"You see? There never was a spell on the bronze lump. You took it to a spell-caster, didn't you?" Sparthera nodded. "And he put some kind of

contagion spell on it, didn't he?" She nodded again. "So the bronze lump sought what it had been a part of. The box. It's been in there too long."

Sung pulled the faded red lining off of the surface. Underneath, the metal was engraved with patterns and lettering. Sung stroked a finger over the odd markings. "It looks like a valuable trinket on the outside. No casual thief would just throw it away. I might have a chance to get it back. But a magician turned robber would take the pointer, just as you did."

She'd had it in her hands! Too late, too late. "When can we start looking for Gar's treasure?"

"Tomorrow morning, if you're so eager. Meanwhile, the afternoon is growing cold. Come here and warm my heart."

"Sung, dear, just how cl..." Sparthera's words trailed off in surprise. She had walked straight into Sung's arms. She had behaved like this with no man, not since that damned tinker. Her voice quavered as she said. "I don't act like this. Sung, what magic is on me now?"

He pulled back a little. "Why, it's your own oath!"

"I feel like that puppet you showed me! This isn't what I meant!"

Sung sighed. "Too bad. Well—"

"I don't mean I won't share your bed." Her voice was shrill with near-hysteria. "I just, I want power over my own limbs, damn you Sung!"

"Yes. I tell you now that binding yourself to me does not involve becoming my concubine."

She pulled away, and turned her back, and found it was possible. "Good. Good. Sung, thank you." Her brow furrowed suddenly and she turned back to face him. "What if you tell me different, later?"

She might have guessed that Sung's answer would be a shrug. "All right. What was I trying to say earlier? Oh, I remember. Just how close is the King's Way? We don't want that caravan camping next to us. Somebody might get nosy."

Sung agreed. They had moved a good distance down the King's Way before they camped for the night.

On the morning Sparthera saddled Twilight and loaded Eagle while Sung packed his gear on the unicorn. The wingbeast caught his attention.

"Where did you get that creature?"

"Near my father's farm. It was running wild. I think it's some sort of magic beast."

Sung shook his head sadly. 'No, quite the opposite. In my grandfather's day there were flocks of beautiful horses that sailed across the sky on wings as wide as the King's Way. He rode one when he was a little boy. It couldn't lift him when he grew too big. As time went on the colts were born with shorter, weaker wings, until all that was left were little beasts like this on. I used to catch them, when I was a

boy, but never to fly. Enchantment is going out of the world, Sparthera. Soon there will be nothing left."

It was a mystery to Sparthera how her companion read the talisman. It looked the same to her, no matter which way he said it pointed. Sung tried to show her when they set off that morning. He set the flattened-out box on the palm of her hand and said, "Keep reading it as you turn it. The runes don't actually change, but when the long end points right, the message becomes 'Ta netyillo iliq pratht' instead of 'tanetyi lo—'"

"Skip it. Just skip it."

In any case, the pointer continued to lead them straight down the King's Way.

They reached an inn about dusk, and Sung paid for their lodging. Sparthera watched him setting the spells against thieves. Sung was not secretive. Quite the contrary: he drilled her in the spells, so that she would be able to set them for him.

Though he had freed her from the obligation, the magician seemed to consider lovemaking as part of their agreement. Sparthera had no complaints. The magician was adept at more than spells. When she told him this, she expected him to preen himself; but Sung merely nodded.

"Keeping the women happy is very necessary in Sung House. How much did I tell you about us, that first night?"

"You were the immortal Sung. You abdicated in favor of your son."

"I was bragging."

"What were you? Not the stablehand, I think."

"Oh, I was the immortal Sung, true enough. We rule a fair-sized farming region, a valley blocked off by mountains and the Yellow River. We know a little magic — we keep a herd of unicorns, and sell the horn, or use it ourselves — but that's not what keeps the farmers docile. They think they're being ruled by a sorcerer seven hundred years old."

"The immortal Sung."

"Yes. I became the immortal Sung when I was twenty. My mother set a spell of *glamour* on me, to make me look exactly like my father. Then I was married to Ma Tay, my cousin, and set on the throne."

"That's ... I never heard of *glamour* being used to make anyone look older."

"That's a nice trick, isn't it? The spell wears off over twenty years, but of course you're getting older too, looking more and more like your father, magic aside. When I reached forty my wife put the *glamour* on my eldest son. And here I am, under oath to travel until nobody has ever heard of Sung House. Well, I've done that. Someday maybe I'll meet my father."

"What happens to your wife?"

"She took my mother's place as head of the House. It's actually the women who rule in Sung House. The immortal Sung is just a figurehead."

Sparthera shook her head, smiling. "It still sounds like a nice job ... and they didn't throw you out naked."

"No. We know all our lives what's going to happen. We think on how we'll leave, what we'll take, where we'll go. We collect tales of other lands, and artifacts that could help us. There's a little treasure room of things a departing Sung may take with him."

He leaned back on the bed and stretched. "When I left, I took the pointer. It always fascinated me, even as a boy. I collected rumors about Gar's treasure. It wasn't just the gold and the jewels that stuck in my mind. There is supposed to be a major magical tool too."

"What is it?"

"It's a levitation device. Haven't you ever wanted to fly?"

Sparthera's lips pursed in a silent O. "What a thief could do with such a thing!"

"Or a military spy."

"Yes ... and the Regency raised hell trying to find Gar's treasure. But of course you'd keep it yourself?"

"Or sell it to one government or another. But I'll fly with it first."

That night, cuddled close in Sung's arms, Sparthera roused herself to ask a question. "Sung? What if I should have a child by you?"

He was silent for a long time. Long enough that she wondered if he'd fallen asleep. When he did answer it was in a very soft voice. "We would ride off into the mountains and build a great hall, and I would put a *glamour* on the child to raise up a new House of Sung."

Satisfied, Sparthera snuggled down into the magician's arms to dream of mountains and gold.

They woke late the next morning, with the dust of the caravan actually in sight. They left it behind them as they rode, still following the King's Way. "This is ridiculous," Sung fretted. "Another day and we'll be in Rynildissen!"

"Is it possible that this Gar actually buried his loot in the King's Way?"

"I wouldn't think he'd have the chance. Still, I suppose nobody would look for it there. Maybe."

Around noon they reached a region of low hills. The King's Way began to weave among them like a snake; but the silver box pointed them steadfastly toward Rynildissen. Sung dithered. "Well, do we follow the road, or do we cut across country wherever the pointer points?"

Sparthera said, "Road, I guess. We'll know if we pass it."

And road it was, until the moment when Sung sucked in his breath with a loud "Ah!"

"What is it?"

"The talisman's pointing that way, south." He turned off, guiding the unicorn uphill. Sparthera followed, pulling the wingbeast along after her. The unicorn seemed to be grumbling just below audibility.

Now the land was rought and wild. There were ravines and dry creekbeds, and tumbled heaps of soil and stone. They were crossing the crest of a hill when Sung said, "Stop."

The unicorn stopped. Sparthera reined in her horse. The wingbeast walked into Twilight's haunches, got kicked, and sat down with a dismal bray.

Sung ignored the noise. "Down in that ravine. We'll have to try it on foot."

They had to move on all fours in places. The bottom of the ravine was thick with brush. Sparthera hesitated as Sung plunged into a thorn thicket. When she heard his muttered curses stop suddenly, she followed.

She found him surrounded by scattered bones, and recognized the skull of an ass. "The pointer reads right in all directions. We're right on it," he said.

A pair of large stones, brown and cracked, looked a bit too much alike. Sparthera touched one. Old leather. Saddle bags?

The bag was so rotten it had almost merged with the earth. It tore easily. Within was cloth that fell apart in her hands, and a few metal ornaments that were green with verdigris. Badges of rank, for a soldier of Rynildissen. In the middle of it all, something twinkled, something bright.

Sung had torn the other bag apart. "Nothing. What have you got?"

She turned it in her hand: a bright faceted stone, shaped like a bird and set into a gold ring. "Oh, how pretty!"

"Hardly worth the effort," Sung said. He worked his way backward out of the thicket and stood up. "Diamonds have no color. They're not worth much. You see this kind of trinket in an Shanton jewel bazaar. Give it here."

Sparthera handed it over, feeling forlorn. "Then that's all there is?"

"Oh, I doubt it. We're on the track. This was just the closest piece. It must have been part of the hoard, or the talisman wouldn't have pointed us here. Even so ... how did it get here? Did Gar lose a pack mule?"

He opened out the pointer. With the bird's beak he traced a looping curve on the silver surface. "There. The talisman is pointing true again. There's still treasure to be found."

They climbed back uphill to their steeds. The King's Way was well behind them now, and lost among the hills. They were picking their way across a nearly dry stream bed when Sung said, "We're passing it."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet." Sung dismounted. "You wait here. Sparthera, come along—" and she realized he'd spoken first to the unicorn. He picked his way carefully up a vast sloping spill of shattered boulders: leg-breaker country. At the top, panting heavily, he opened the box out and turned in a circle.

"Well?"

Sung turned again. He spoke singsong gibberish in what might have been a lengthy spell; but it sounded like cursing.

"Are you just going to keep spinning?"

"It says all directions are wrong!"

"Uh? Point it down."

Sung stared at her. Then he pointed the talisman at his feet. He said, "'Ta netyillo—' Sparthera, my love, you may be the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I am delighted to hear it. My shovel's still on the horse. Shall I go for it?"

"Yes. No, wait a bit." He started walking, staring at the talisman. "It must be deep. Yards deep. More. Forget the shovel, there must be a cave under us." He grinned savagely at her. "We'll have to find the entrance. We're almost there, love. Come on."

They trudged down the hill, trying to avoid twisted ankles or worse. Sparthera paused to catch her breath and caught a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye. It was headed for the animals. "Sung! What—"

Twilight whinnied in terror. He tossed his head, pulling loose the reins Sparthera had looped over a bush, and bolted downhill. The unicorn had splayed his front feet and lowered his head, as if he thought he still owned a spear. The packbeast, filling the air with a bedlam of sound, was bounding rapidly away in two-pace-long jumps, tiny wings beating the air frantically.

Sung let out a yell and charged up to the top of the ravine, swinging a heavy branch he'd snatched up on the way. Sparthera clambered up beside him, swearing as she saw her animals heading off across the landscape. There was a loud wailing sound that put the wingbeast's efforts to shame, and then silence. The thing had vanished.

"What was that!"

"I don't know. I'm more interested in where it went. Keep an eye out, love." Sung pulled his sword from the pack and wandered about the shattered rock.

Sparthera's nose picked up a heavy musky animal odor. She followed it, heart pounding, knife in hand. They were too close to the treasure to stop now.

The odor was wafting out of a black gap in the rocks, less than a yard across. Sung clambered up to look.

"That's it," he said. "It's not big enough, though. If we crawled through that, the thing — whatever it is — would just take our heads as they poked through. We'll have to move some rocks."

Sparthera picked up a heavy boulder and hurled it away. "I feel an irrational urge to go home."

"I can't go home. Let's move some rocks," said Sung, and she did. The sun had dropped a fair distance toward Rynildissen, and every muscle in her body was screaming, before the dripping, panting Sung said, "Enough.

Now we need torches."

"Sung. Did it ... occur to you ... to let me rest?"

"Well, why didn't you ... oh." Sung was disconcerted. "Sparthera, I'm used to giving orders to women, because I'm supposed to be the immortal Sung. But it's just for show. I'm also used to being disobeyed."

"I can't." She was crying.

"I'll be more careful. Shall we rest, have some tea?"

"Good. Offer me a swallow of wine."

"That's not—"

"For Khulm's sake, Sung, do you think I'd go in there *drunk*? It's in there. I know it. I kept waiting for it to jump on me. Don't you have a spell to protect us?"

"No. We don't even know what it is. Here—" He turned her around and began to massage her neck and shoulders, fingers digging in. Sparthera felt tensed muscles unravelling, loosening. It was a wonderful surprise.

She said, "It must have half-killed the Sung women to let you go."

"Somehow they managed." She barely heard the bitterness; but it *did* bother him.

It was dark in there. The late afternoon light only reached a dozen paces in. They stepped in, holding the torches high.

There was a rustling flurry of motion and a loud whimpering cry.

If one of them had run, the other would have followed. As it was, they walked slowly forward behind Sung's sword and Sparthera's dagger.

The cave wasn't large. A stream ran through the middle. Sparthera noted two skeletons on either side of the stream, lying face up as if posed—

Another cry and a scrabbling sound. Something huge and dark moved just outside the perimeter of light. The animal odor had become sickeningly strong. Sung held the light higher.

Off in a corner, something huge was trying to pack itself into a very narrow crevice. It looked at them with absolute panic in its eyes, pulled its long scaly tail closer under its legs and tried fruitlessly to move away.

"What in the world is it?"

"Nothing from this world, that's certain," Sung said. "It looks like something conjured up out of a bad dream. Probably was. Gar's guardian."

The creature was partly furred and partly scaled. It had a long toothed snout and broad paddle-like front paws with thick nails. There was a rusted iron collar around its neck, with a few links of broken chain attached. Now its claws stopped grinding against rock, and its tail came up to cover its eyes.

"What is it trying to do?" Sparthera whispered.

"Well, it seems to be trying to hide in that little crack."

"Oh, for the love of Khulm! You mean it's scared!"

The beast gave a long wailing moan at the sound of her voice. Its claws resumed scratching rock.

"Let it alone," Sung said. He swung the torch around to reveal the rest of the cave. They found a torn and scattered pack, with the remains of weevily flour and some broken boxes nearly collapsed from dry rot. Two skeletons were laid out as for a funeral. They had not died in bed. The ribcage on one seemed to have been torn wide open. The other seemed intact below the neck; but it was still wearing a bronze helmet bearing the crest of a soldier of Rynildissen; and the helmet and skull had been squashed as flat as a miser's sandwich.

Aside from the small stream that ran between them, and assorted gypsum deposits, the cave was otherwise empty.

"I'm afraid the Regent's army got here first," Sung said.

Sparthera bent above one of the bodies. "Do you think that thing did this? Did it kill them, or just gnaw the bodies? It doesn't seem dangerous now."

"It probably wasn't all that scared in the beginning." Sung was grinning. "Gar must have left it here to guard the treasure, with a chain to keep it from running away. When the Regent's soldiers found the cave, it must have got the first ones in. Then the rest piled in and pounded it into mush. Conjured beasts like that are practically impossible to kill, but did you notice the scars on the muzzle and forelegs? It hasn't forgotten."

"I feel sort of sorry for it," Sparthera said. Then the truth came home to her and she said, "I feel sorry for us! The treasure must have been gone for years. Except — the talisman led us *here!*"

Sung walked forward, following the talisman. He stopped above the skeleton with the flattened skull. "'Ta netyillo—' Yes."

He reached into the ribcage and came up with a mass of color flickering in his hands. Sparthera reached into it and found a large ruby. There were three others besides, and two good-sized emeralds.

Sung laughed long and hard. "So, we have a greedy soldier to thank. He ran in, saw a pile of jewels, snatched up a fistful and swallowed them. He must have thought it would come out all right in the end. Instead, Gar's pet got him." Sung wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Fate is a wonderful thing. Here, give me those."

She did, and Sung began tracing the curve on the talisman, one jewel at a time. She said, "They wouldn't have left a talisman of levitation."

"No, they wouldn't."

"And this stuff isn't worth nearly my weight in gold."

Sung stiffened. "The pointer! It's pointing into the wall itself!" He got up and began moving along the wall.

Sparthera grimaced but said nothing.

Sung called, "Either it's cursed deep in there, or there's another cave, or ... why do I bother? It's pointing to Rynildissen."

"Maybe other places too. There was a war with Sarpuree, seventy years ago. We lost, so there was tribute to pay. I don't even have to guess where the Regent got the money to pay for it all. He may have sold most of the treasure."

"Humph. Yes. And if there were any decorative items left, they could be spread all through the palace. And some of the soldiers probably hid a few little things like that diamond bird. Even if we were crazy enough to rob the Regent's palace, we'd never get it all. It's the end of our treasure hunt, girl."

"But you said ... Sung! How can I ever win my freedom if we don't go on?"

"Oh, we'll go on. But not looking for Gar's treasure." Sung scooped the jewels into his pocket and handed her the little diamond bird. "Keep this as a memento. The rest ... well, I've thought of opening a toy shop. In Rynildissen, maybe."

"A *toy shop*?"

Sung frowned. "You don't like toys, do you?"

"Everybody likes toys. But we're *adults*, Sung!"

"Girl, don't you know that human beings are natural magicians? I think it's hereditary. The magic was always there to be used ... but now it isn't. And we still want magic. Especially children."

She was still angry. Sung reached to run his fingers over the tawny stubble on her head. "We'll live well enough. Come kiss me, little thief. Seven years isn't such a long time."

Sparthera kissed him; she couldn't help it. Then she said, "I wondered if a diamond bird could be your talisman of levitation."

Sung's eyes widened. "I wonder ... it's worth a try. Not in here, though." He took the bird and scrambled up scree toward the cave entrance.

Sparthera started after him. Then, holding her torch high, she looked up. The rock tapered to a high natural vault. It looked unstable, dangerous. Something ... a bright point?

Compelled, she continued climbing after Sung. But the diamond trinket (she told herself) was no flying spell. She'd been wrong: no soldier would have stolen that. It would be treason. By staying here she would be working in Sung's best interests (she told herself, scrambling up the rocks.) There was no point in shouting after him. If she were wrong, at least he wouldn't be disappointed (she told herself, and at last the pull of her oath lost its grip.)

Sung was out of sight. Sparthera scrambled back down and set to work.

The soldiers had taken all of their equipment before they turned the cave into a crypt for their brethren by pulling down the entrance. They had taken armor, but left the crushed helmet that

was part of one corpse. They had taken the metal point from a snapped spear; but a three-pace length of shaft remained.

Sparthera dipped a piece of cloth into the stream, then into some of the mouldy flour scattered on the rock floor. She kneaded the cloth until it had turned gooey, then wrapped it around the broken tip of the spear. She climbed scree to get closer to the ceiling, and reached up with the spear, toward a bright point on the cave roof.

It stuck. She pulled it down: thin gold filigree carved into a pair of bird's wings, about the size of her two hands. It tugged upward against her fingers.

"Lift me," she whispered. And she rose until her head bumped rock.

"Set me down," she whispered, and drifted back to earth.

No castle in the world held a room so high that she could not rob it, with this. And she waited for the impulse that would send her scrambling out to give it to Sung.

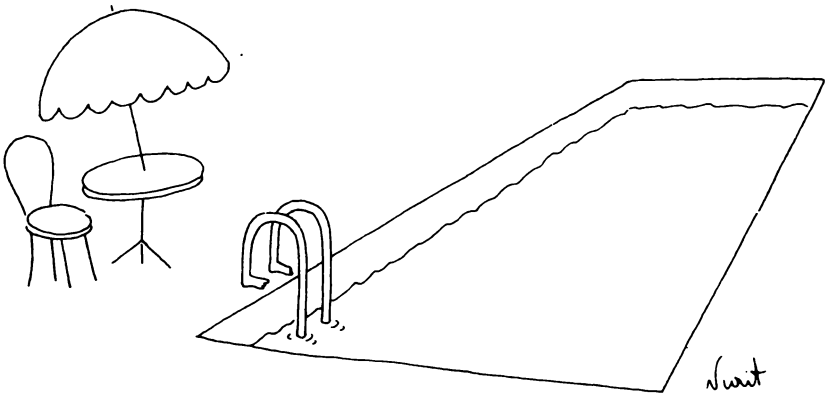
Sung was bounding downhill with his arms flapping, one hand clutching the diamond bauble, looking very like a little boy at play. He turned in fury at the sound of Sparthera's laughter.

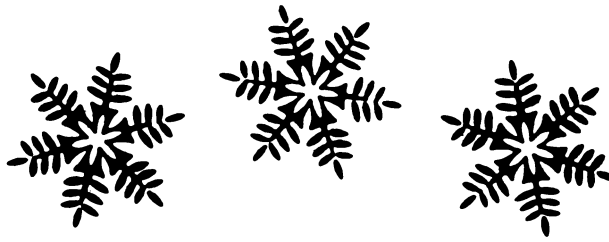
"I've found it!" she called, holding the golden talisman high.

And as Sung ran toward her, beaming delight, Sparthera floated.

For the instant in which she flew, Sparthera's weight in gold had been far less than the value of the paltry treasure they had found.

She might stay with Sung long enough to take back the jewels, or at least the wings. She might even stay longer. If he were right about the toy shop ... perhaps he need never learn that she was free.





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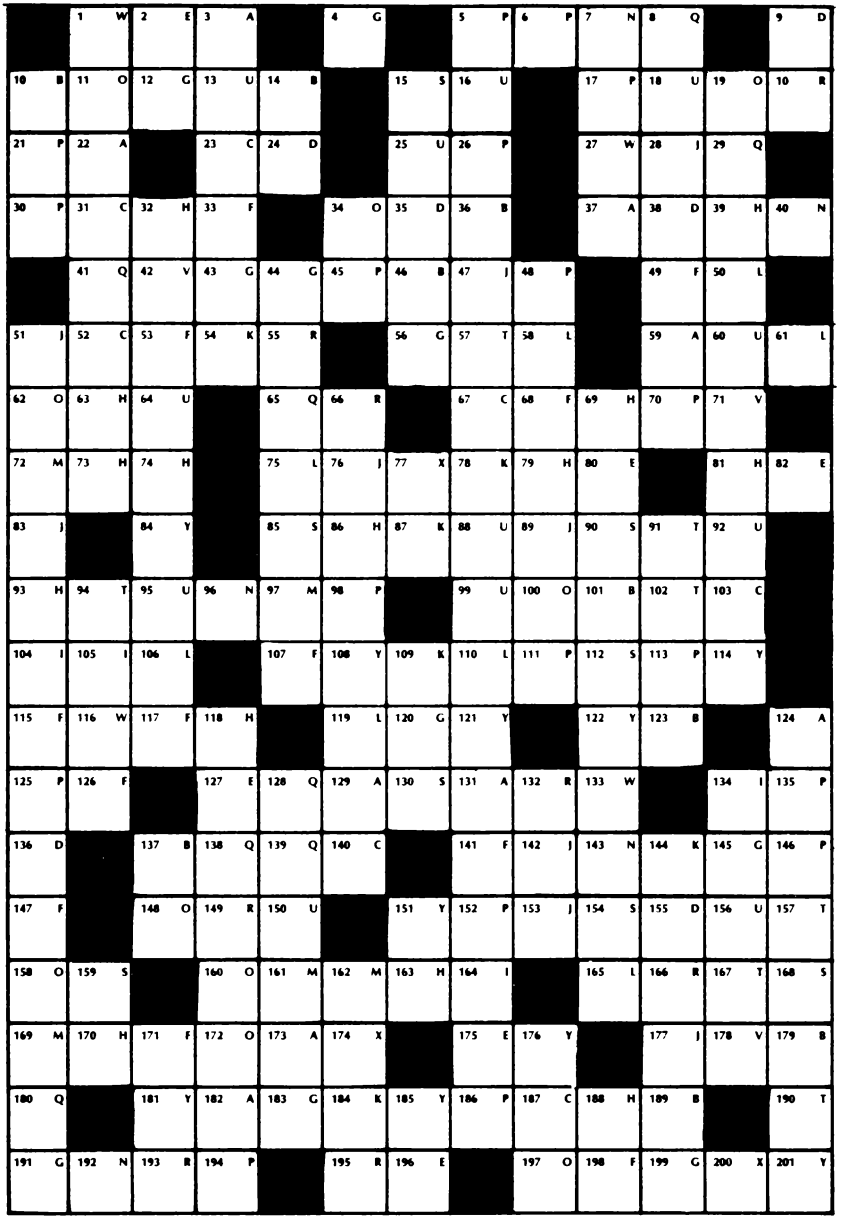
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Acrostic Puzzle

by Rachel Cosgrove Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Niven's roundabout.

182	124	173	37	59	131	3	129	22

B. Farthest aft.

179	123	189	101	46	137	10	36	14

C. Double veil.

140	187	67	31	52	23	103

D. Wrote DYING OF THE LIGHT.

9	38	136	24	35	155

E. SFWA Ex-prexy.

2	196	127	82	80	175

F. Cloud layer.

33	198	141	107	53	126	115	171	117	68

49	147

G. Exploding.

44	12	145	191	120	4	56	183	43	199

H. Wrote THE ANYTHING BOX, (two words).

39	63	73	118	69	79	32	163	74	170

86	93	81	188

I. Hook with a handle.

164	105	134	104

J. What you must pay.

51	83	153	47	89	177	142	76	28

K. Of Earthsea fame.

184	87	78	144	109	54

L. Wrote "The Blue Giraffe" (first name).

61	75	50	106	119	110	165	58

M. Pertaining to middle tunic of the eye.

162	169	97	72	161

N. Nebula winner.

7	192	96	40	143

O. Ocular.

158	100	148	62	34	19	197	11	172	160

P. Readers reverse roles, (four words).

5	45	26	152	113	70	17	30	135	125

111	146	21	48	186	194	6	98

Q. Descent.

29	65	41	139	8	138	180	128

R. What Hugo loser is doing.

66	20	195	132	193	149	166	55

S. SF critic.

168	112	15	154	130	90	159	85

T. Not THE *MIDWICH* CUCKOOS, but close!

157	190	91	167	94	102	57

U. Gunn's eavesdroppers, (two words).

18	92	88	95	25	99	156	16	13	60

64	150

V. Possesses.

178	42	71

W. To vex (Scot.).

1	27	133	116

X. Exclamation by Lovecraft readers

77	174	200

Y. Where Frankenstein held sway.

185	84	181	122	114	151	201	176	108	121

Answers will appear in the December issue.

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